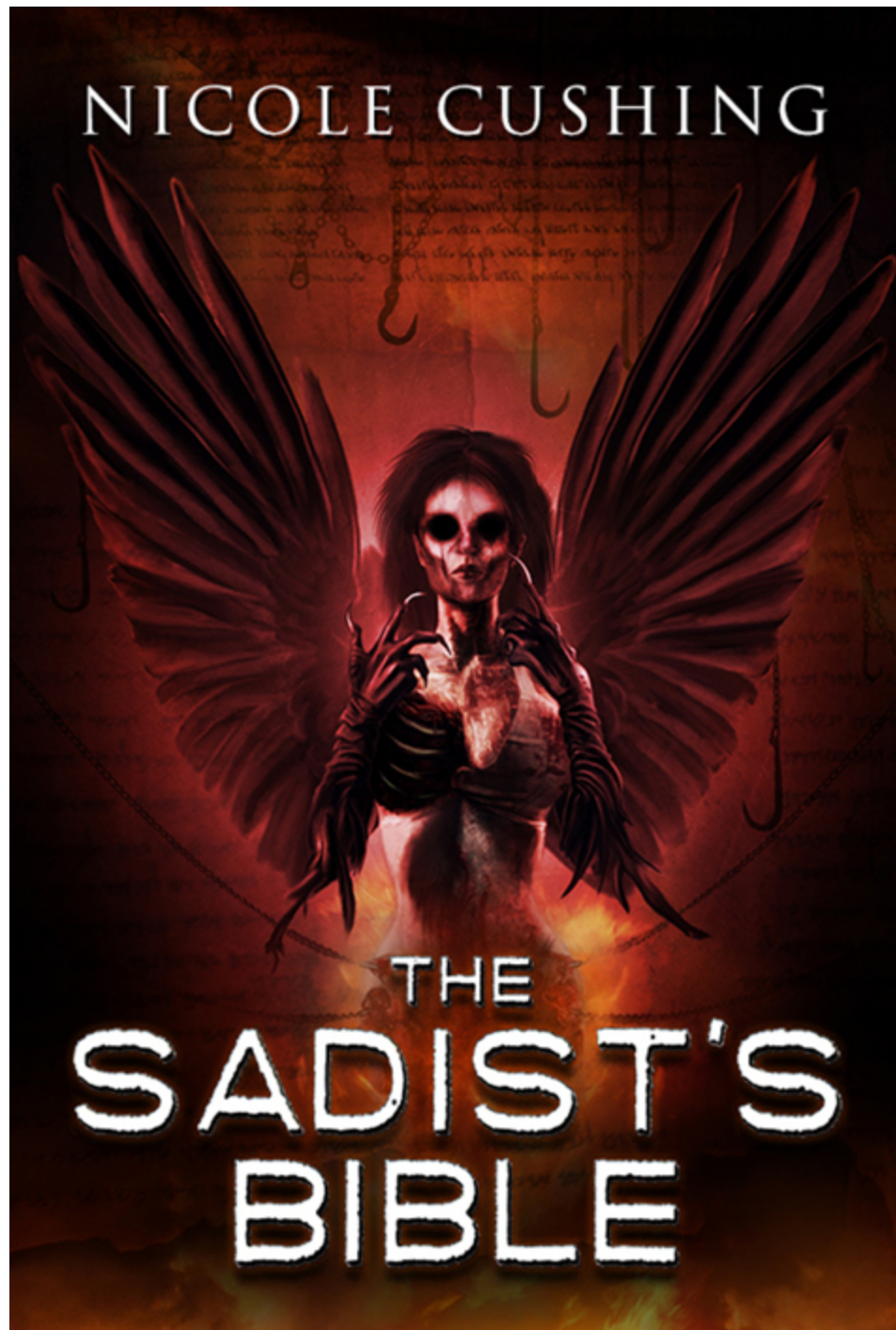
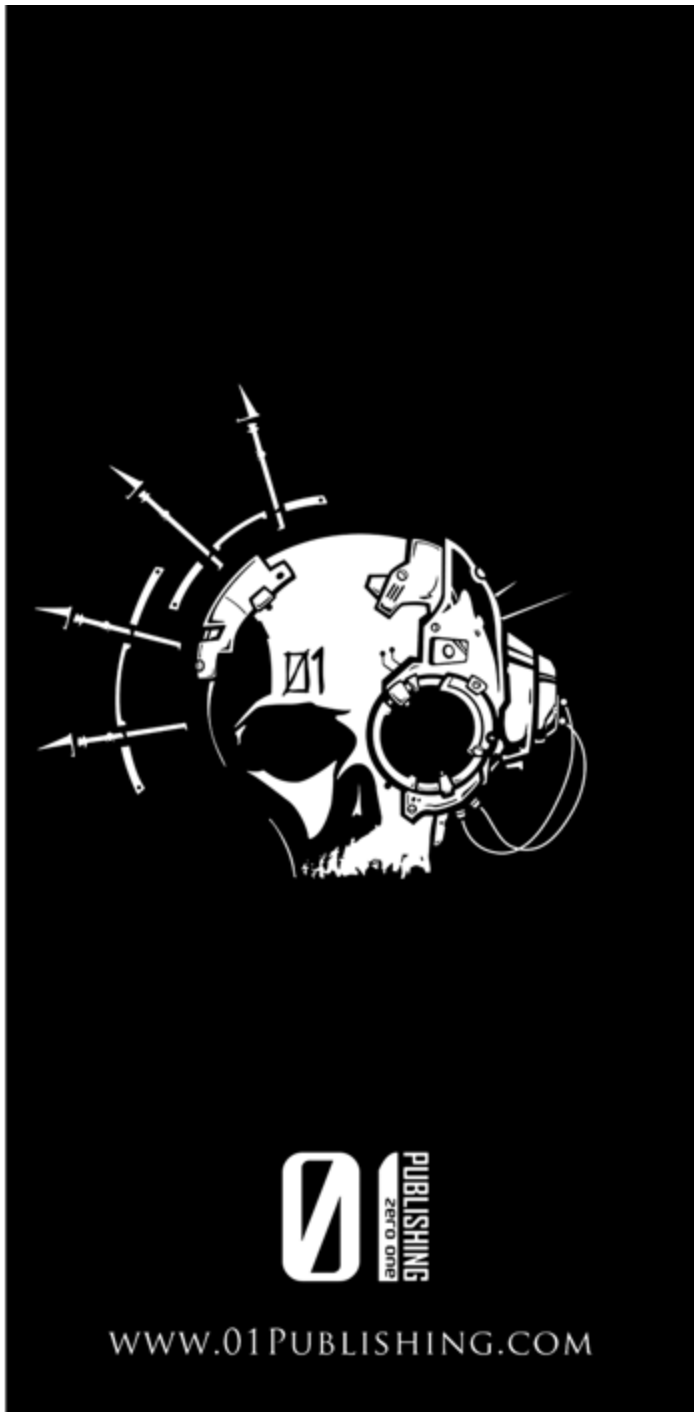




THE SADIST'S BIBLE

by Nicole Cushing



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fictional or are used in an imaginary manner to entertain. Any resemblance to any real

persons, living or dead, is co-incidence or purely intentional for the purpose of satire.

THE SADIST'S BIBLE

By Nicole Cushing.

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“Do u really think ur ready 2 die? I don’t want u chickening out on me.”

Ellie thought about Lori’s question. Stared at it in the chat window. Rubbed her eyes.

Yawned. It was late. She should start packing, but she had to see this through. It was

simply too important a conversation to cut short. The click-clack of keys on her ancient laptop sounded like grinding teeth as they churned out her reply.

“There’s nothing here

for me. So...why not? I mean, I’m damned anyway.”

“I think it will b awesome. Dying is the most intimate thing 2 people can do 2gether.”

Ellie paused. Let that sink in. Lori had a way with words. She was younger, but

seemed so smart. Could’ve made it into college, but hadn’t even applied. Should’ve gone

into advertising. She could make even the most outrageous thought sound believable.

Was she right? Was dying the most intimate act two people could share? Ellie wasn’t

sure. She started typing. “But before we die, there will be...well...you know...”

“I will ravish u, before. We will suck things and lick things and poke things and

probe things. Just thinking about it makes me want to jill off. U won’t die a virgin. :)”

“I’m not a virgin. I’m almost old enough to be your mother.” She hit the enter key

and thought about what she was going to say next. Something pithy and sexy and...

Lori’s next message plopped into the window, interrupting her train of thought.

“We’re only thirteen years apart. That’s not old enough 2 b my Mom (but, maybe it is,

out where u live). ;) Anyway, I know ur not a virgin. You’ve had cock, but not pussy. Ur a girl-gin. Very well. U won’t die a girl-gin.”

Ellie’s eyes focused on a single word: “die”. Her heart pounded. The muscles in her

arms stiffened. She took a deep breath, absorbing the finality of it. How could Lori chat about it so casually? They’d talked about this for weeks. Now, she was getting ready to

make it real. To pack. To leave. To never come back.

“I...I think I love you, Lori.”

Ten seconds passed. Twenty. Thirty. Then, finally, the message. It wasn’t what Ellie

had been waiting for.

“I want 2 make love 2 u. And I want 2 die with u.”

Ellie felt her face flush. Something inside her started to feel sick and broken. She

pounded the keys more forcefully as she typed. “Damn it! Why can’t you say that you

love me, too?”

“Why is it so important that I say it?”

“Because then I’ll know I’m dying for love.”

“Ur dying for the same reason I am. 2 escape. Ur escaping a stupid marriage u

should’ve never agreed 2 and I’m escaping...well...let’s put it this way: a very bad...man.

Someone who won’t ever stop torturing me, unless I’m permanently out of reach. So it’s

not about love. I’m not being mean. Just...honest. Anything else is self-delusion.”

Ellie thought back to the last nineteen years with Jesse. A stupid marriage? Yes, she

thought. Lori was right.

(Lori was *always*, right – wasn’t she? She was so much younger than Ellie, but far more brave about pursuing what she needed. Lori was still in her twenties, but had

already made peace with death and figured out her own sexuality. Ellie envied her.)

The marriage had indeed been *stupid*. Self-deluding. Mother liked Jesse and encouraged her to date him, simply because he was a guy and the dates were enough to

encourage her to wear makeup and fix her hair. Mother never thought she looked girly

enough. A date turned into two, turned into a proposal, turned into a wedding right out of high school. Everyone thought she was pregnant, but she wasn't. That was the ironic part

– everyone gossiping that she must've gotten knocked up, when in fact she was a virgin

on her wedding day.

That said, she'd thought she wanted a child, once. But there had been many problems. When she turned thirty-five they both decided against continuing the expensive fertility treatments. Jesse had started volunteering as the Sunday School superintendent at church. He'd told her he felt called into this ministry as a way to soften the blow of being childless. He'd brought her on board as a teacher. She joined in the get-togethers attended by all the other church ladies, too. She was the only one whose hair wasn't gray. They

sipped coffee and read the Bible and lamented the number of women in modern society

who sported tattoos.

Sometimes she'd joined in with their tattoo-bashing, just to feel included.

Yes, Ellie was forced to agree with Lori. (*Sexy black short-shorts Lori. Huge, milky-white tits falling out of a purple tank top Lori. Young, free-*

spirited Lori. Lori the Wise.

Lori the Brave.)

Lori knew Ellie better than Ellie knew herself. She revealed to Ellie that she was

choosing to die because it offered the only apparent escape from a life that had been

created *for* her, rather than *by* her.

Then, another message popped up in the chat window: “How does it feel 2 finally

come out?”

Ellie thought long and hard about the question. She liked looking at soft legs and

tight rumps and big breasts and imagining what she might do with them. She wasn’t quite

so crazy about Jesse huffing atop her. Such things were discussed openly on television

these days. But they weren’t appropriate topics of conversation in southern Indiana, at

least not among any of the acquaintances she called friends. She’d never admitted these

things to anyone outside of the groups and chat windows of the social network.

It had all started this way: one night, on a lark, she typed “suicide” into the social

network's search bar just to see what came up. After only forty-five minutes of checking out links and groups, she found a refuge called "The Buddy System". Its description read:

"Putting the 'pair' in despair ;)". She asked to join, and to her delight was allowed in. It was a place to find a suicide partner.

After a day or two of lurking, she felt safe enough to post and (eventually) even

divulge her attraction to women. Some of the men in the group made crude comments

and sent her unsolicited pornography they thought she'd enjoy. It horrified her to think of such photographs appearing on the same computer she prepared Sunday School lessons

on. She was tempted to leave after that fiasco, but Lori showed up the next day and sent her a private message. It said she thought Ellie was pretty. "A soft butch..." she said (it took some Googling for Ellie to decipher just what that meant). "I'm bi," Lori said. "I'll be ur buddy. We can mess around b4 we finish it."

Lori's photo looked young, but not *too* young. She said she was twenty-four. Legal.

Stunning. A little chubby, maybe, but that just emphasized her curves. (And *what*

curves.) Ellie felt a pang of grief at the thought that someone so young and hot wanted to die. Ellie felt butterflies in her stomach at the revelation that such a woman found her attractive. Then she felt guilty. Such desires were an abomination. God would be

disappointed in her.

"Hey, u still there?"

Ellie had drifted off. Gone off yet again into one of her fogs, thinking about how

they'd first met. She saw Lori's unanswered question there in the messaging window:

"How does it feel 2 finally come out?"

She started typing again. "Who said anything about coming out? This won't be

public. It doesn't need to be. I thought we'd agreed on that."

A pause.

"U came out 2 me. And 2 the others in the group. Doesn't that count?"

That was different, Ellie thought. Coming out on the social network didn't involve

talking to people. It just involved *typing*.

She was about to write her response when Lori dropped another line of chat in the

window. "U realize this has consequences, right? This isn't just a game 2 u, is it? We're talking about something...something really REAL. Fucking is different than talking about sex. Dying is different than talking about death. What we've done so far...the phone calls and the Skyping and this...I mean...I like it...but I want 2 make sure I can count on u 2 b there. This is important 2 me."

"You're the one talking about it like it's a trip to the nail salon. How do I know that

YOU'RE going to be there when I get to West Virginia? You really haven't considered

how big a leap this is. You're still talking about it like it's some sort of bonding

experience."

"That's because I'm ready. Long past ready. I'd just kill myself here, now, alone, if I

didn't have the urge to fuck ur brains out first. So, I'm comfortable enough with death to joke about it. Ur still scared, aren't u? That's what I'm concerned about. Ur going to

chicken out."

There they were, two people sharing cyber-closeness, each leery of trusting the other

would make the leap to flesh-closeness.

"You can count on me. I'm leaving tomorrow. I've got to get to bed though.

Tomorrow's going to be a busy day. I've got lots to do before I leave."

"*HUGS*"

"*HUGS* right back at you."

Then she closed her windows and shut down her computer. Brushed her teeth.

Changed into shorts and a T-shirt. Wiggled into bed next to Jesse as he snored through

his C-PAP mask.

* * *

The next morning, Ellie had to pack pantsuits. If she didn't, Jesse would suspect this

wasn't really a business trip. She had to pack the noose. If she didn't, she'd have to stop and buy rope while on the road.

She had to wash her panties, so she'd have enough. (*Granny panties*, she thought.

Just when in the course of my marriage did I let myself go to the point I wore granny panties?) How many would she need? How many more days would she live? She erred on the side of cowardice. Five. That's how many days she'd told Jesse she would be

gone. She'd arrive in West Virginia early tomorrow. Then three days there (during which

she'd have to feign attendance at a trade show). Then a day for the return trip. (But she wasn't coming back – not really – at least, not alive.)

Her *actual* plan – no, she couldn't claim credit for it; *Lori's* plan – was to do the deed at a luxury resort nestled away in the mountains. A place called the Hillbriar. The website revealed it to be magnificently ritzy and equally sad-looking. Opulent but

obsolete. The sort of place that had been popular in the decades before air conditioning, when the mountains offered a relief from summer heat that was impossible to obtain any

other way. The sort of place that had fallen on hard times since then, offering slightly discounted rates to bring people in. Once she arrived, she'd only have a few days to work up the nerve to kill herself.

(No, not to *work up* the nerve...a few days to get drunk and, hell, maybe even try some drugs for the first time and let the chemicals dissolve any lingering resistance like so much liquid plumber eating through clogged pipes. At this point, she felt well-beyond *working up* to anything. She only

wished to succumb. The Hillbriar had a reputation as an oasis of decadence in the midst of rural poverty. Where better to succumb to the inertia of her own perversity? Where better to let it carry her down to where it had always been

tugging her?)

Succumb.

Succubus.

Lori was the succubus she'd succumb to. They'd make love for the first and only

time and then – without so much as a shower or a prayer for forgiveness – they'd die. If all went as planned they'd remember to place the Do Not Disturb sign on the door, and

the hotel staff wouldn't discover them for a few days. There'd be bloating and rope and

decay and flies intermingled with the scent of sex.

The Hillbriar people would be shocked. She and Lori didn't *enjoy* the idea of

shocking people, though. That wasn't the point. The point was that they shared two

unspeakable urges that demanded to be satisfied.

Would it make the news?

She didn't know. A double suicide at the Hillbriar would be out of the ordinary, of

course. But neither she nor Lori were from West Virginia. No one in the town would

know or care about them. That would discourage local news coverage. The sex aspect

would grant the story a certain edginess. But would the media report that part? Given that she was married to a man, wouldn't they withhold that information? For his sake? The

hotel would see it as a scandal and would try to keep things hush hush. And the hotel

owners likely had enough money and local influence to ensure things were kept hush

hush.

Besides, it wasn't as though she was a celebrity with actual character *worth*

assassinating. She was just a saleswoman for a barge-building company on the Ohio

River. She looked and sounded no different than any other woman who'd spent her life in

southern Indiana. She'd lived without fanfare. Her house looked like every other house in her subdivision. Her hair looked like every other coiffed head in her subdivision. She

dressed without fanfare. She dreamed without fanfare. It seemed to be the only way to

live.

Would she die without fanfare?

She considered this for some time before actually agreeing to Lori's plan and then

she decided that, yes, that's the way it would turn out. No obituary in Clark County, at least, would disclose the cause of death. Word would get out, of course. It couldn't be

kept totally quiet, but no one at the funeral would mention it. This, she imagined, would lead to a certain tension – the weight of the secret on all of them. *Serves 'em right*, she thought. *If I have to die for my secret, the least they could do is acquire one of their own.*

A mental image came to her: the pastor, his entourage of church ladies, and Jesse making small talk around her coffin. Everyone's careful to avoid mentioning the s-word. They're walking on eggshells, haunted by the unspeakable. *Live with it*, she thought. *Feel that weight on your shoulders? The tightness in your head? That's what having a secret feels like. Live with it!*

Then there'd be the flipping of calendars. Months. Years. Until one day her life

would be so little remembered that it would be as though she'd never been born. (How

long would it take for her to be practically forgotten? Ten years? Twenty? Surely not

much longer.)

But first she had to finish packing the pantsuits. Finish washing her panties.

* * *

In Portsmouth, Virginia, Lori wrapped a powder blue housecoat belt around her neck

and started to jill off. She exerted no pressure on the belt. This wasn't the time for

strangulation. This was the time for fantasizing. *Rehearsal*. She wondered if she'd jill off when she hanged herself. Would she find suicide erotic? Would there be an instinct for

self-preservation that would lead her to flail her hands up to the rope, or would she defy the odds and have the presence of mind to go out while getting off? She liked the sheer

boldness of the idea. The perversity. In the whole history of womankind, had anyone

masturbated during a suicide attempt? Possibly. They'd *both* have to jill off to up the ante. Surely, in the entire history of the world, no *two* adulterous women hanged and pleased themselves simultaneously.

There was much to do to get ready for it all. Packing. Mapping things out on GPS.

Getting cash out of the bank.

She chided herself. *No, don't think about the preparations. Not now. Think of the*

payoff. The high of dying. The orgasm of death throes. The escape. Think of that. Think of that. That's the pleasurable part. Don't start worrying and fuck up this moment. Don't start thinking about—

—the baby.

She hadn't told Ellie she was a mother. That would've only complicated matters.

Ellie would never have gone along with any of this if she'd known a child was involved.

But, of course, the baby would have to go with her. She would kill the baby. Then she

and Ellie would kill themselves. And that way the baby's father could no longer torment

her. She would go to Hell for her multiple sins. She would be tortured, eternally. And yet torture was a given, wasn't it? Life was torture. It had never been anything else. So what did she have to lose? And besides, she suspected that Hell's torture would be less painful than that dished out by her baby's father. At the very least, it would introduce some

novelty into the equation. *His* torture never changed. Every week He came to visit her and inflicted the same sadistic routine.

Melted her lips together so she couldn't scream.

Lopped off her arms with the sheer power of His thoughts.

And His body was literally on fire (but wasn't consumed). His *cock* was literally on fire (but not consumed). And He shoved it up her ass and then up her cunt. And the sour, smoky stench of her own burning holes made her want to faint, but she couldn't. And

each hole would be blistered and scorched from the flames, but that didn't stop Him. And His cum was like boiling oil that commingled with the weeping of her blisters. And His

kisses were like the stings of a jellyfish. And His touch turned her skin into black carbon and gray ash. And He'd slap her and punch her and fracture her ribs. And she should've

passed out, but she couldn't. And she wanted to die, but she couldn't.

And when it was all over He'd heal her injuries, and He'd whisper in her ear that

He'd be back next Sunday to do it all over again. And for the rest of the week Lori would relive it all in her nightmares.

Her baby's father was God. *God* fucked her. *God* punished her. It was said that Hell was the only place that provided eternal separation from God, so Lori would arrange

things so she would go there. Even if the suicide wouldn't land her there, the homicide

surely would. And the baby – His baby, who should have never come into existence

anyway – would be put out of his misery.

Yes, she would fuck God over. Kill His offspring. Cheat on Him, with a woman.

Escape. Maybe even manage to humiliate Him in the process. All of this would turn out

to be a magnificent “fuck you” to the Almighty.

The only question was, could she pull this off? There were risks of getting caught.

Yes, He could read her thoughts. He knew her every desire. But she wasn't His only

concubine. He'd told her she was only one of many. He couldn't keep tabs on all of them

at once, could He? If she was lucky, He'd be paying attention to the others during her

escape.

But first, Lori would have to go to Mom and Dad's house to take the baby away.

That would be a treacherous step in the journey. Mom and Dad would fight her. But she

knew she was up to it.

But no, don't think about such chores. Chill the fuck out, girl. Chill. The. Fuck. Out.

She had a couple of Xanax pills in her nightstand. She reached in and found them.

Took them. And her head started to grow softer and lighter. And the world started to

grow softer and lighter. And she let out a sigh, as the chemicals seemed to erase the entire concept of God from her head and render the world a more palatable place. And she

started pinching and twisting her nipples to get back into the mood. It took about a half hour to reach full arousal again, but it worked. She had a renewed ability to look upon

every square inch of her flesh as a potential epicenter for orgasm. A renewed ability to look upon herself as something more than a victim.

Mmmmm... She ran her fingers down along her labia and felt her hips buck up

involuntarily to meet the strokes. Yes, she would think about all the worrisome aspects of this later. Now was the time to focus on getting off.

There were several scenarios she played through in her head as she slipped fingers

inside herself.

In the first scenario, they'd hang themselves in separate rooms. The second was

hotter, though: they'd hang themselves right next to each other. Maybe even jill *each other* off. Maybe their orgasms and death throes would be intermixed. The blood in their bodies wouldn't know what to do. Maybe it'd rush up to the site of the strangulation and turn their necks purple. Maybe it would rush down to their pussies, instead.

Maybe, Lori thought, the only way to ensure they both got off would be to bring a

third person into the picture. They could hire a whore to get them off while they died. She let the tip of her finger graze her clitoris. *Damn, that would be hot.* They'd make sure she was young – nineteen, twenty. The younger, the better the chances she'd agree to

something so extreme. The younger, the better the chances she'd be scarred by it.

Traumatized.

Fuck, yeah.

Her hips bucked up. Legs splayed out.

Yep, the younger the whore, the less-prepared she'd be to handle all of this. The

younger the whore, the better the chances that Lori and Ellie would live on as a series of recurring nightmares inside that whore's head.

She licked her lip. Her soul simmered.

Fuck, yeah.

They could live on as traumatic nightmares that would haunt the whore at three a.m.

Just like *Lori's* nightmares haunted *her* each night. The whore's nightmares would awaken the john dozing next to her, Lori imagined. He'd look at the

clock while she was

moaning and tossing in bed and decide it would be best that he left. He'd find the money he'd paid her and take it. Maybe take the girl's whole stash, if he could find it. Yes, that would be what would happen. She and Ellie would go to Hell, but they'd live on (in a

way) here on Earth, in a whore's nightmares. They would, in a way, be cheating God and

the Devil at the same time!

Her brain surged to a rolling boil. She felt thrown in and out of her

body...experienced a sense of flipping in and out of time.

She let out furtive groans and squeals. She did not want to be heard by the man in the

apartment downstairs. Death shuddered inside of her. Noose. Hanging. Whore. Licking.

Escaping. Escaping! So tight. *Fuck, yeah. Fuck, yeah. Fuck...*

...yeah.

* * *

The adulterers were both fools, of course.

For all their talk about the pleasures of the flesh, they actually lived in their heads: in a world of conjecture, rationalization, might-haves and should-haves and maybes.

When they chatted or swapped naughty photographs online, it was as though they'd

entered a wee pocket of time and space hidden away from sunrise and sunset and toil and obligation. Their ideas about death (like their ideas about life, like their expectations of sex) were influenced by fantasy rather than fact. Dewy-eyed delusions.

Lori, in particular, was almost-comically ill-informed about so many things. She

thought she might somehow escape my notice, but I am infinite! Her little brain couldn't fathom the idea of omniscience. I only allowed her to proceed down this path as a way to further maximize her torture (and because I found myself a bit intrigued by the woman she planned to die with).

Likewise, she was clueless about the habits of prostitutes. They do not, typically, fall asleep in the arms of their johns. If they're with a john, they're working. Like vampires, they sleep by day.

And both women were clueless in regard to suicide.

Had they performed even a cursory search on the Internet, they would have found

articles attesting to the foolishness of hanging. They would have read testimonials from E.M.T.s discussing how accidental decapitation was, perhaps, the most merciful outcome.

They would have read the reports of bodies found with fresh, frantic scratch marks on their necks and chins – signs of a struggle to get out of the noose, signs of too-late second thoughts. They would have found out that death usually came from some combination of suffocation and interrupted circulation of blood to the brain. They would have realized that the hanged have no energy for orgasm. They're too busy dying.

The Escape from God

Ellie yearned for the open road. Jesse reminded her far too often that he'd miss her.

She let him hold her. Let him kiss her and grope her. She feigned groping back, while a

hunger for Lori gnawed at her. She imagined what Lori's tongue would feel like as it

worked its way from her thigh to her pussy. But now Jesse was saying something she

didn't catch.

"What's that, honey?"

"I *said*, do you need any money for tolls?" Jesse, the responsible one, always carried cash. She hadn't bothered finding out if there were any tolls between southern Indiana

and West Virginia. She decided to err on the side of caution. "I'll take twenty, if you have it, sweetheart. That should be more than enough."

The house was like a pressure cooker. Jesse's presence exerted pressure on her, to be

sure – the pressure of guilt for the affair she was about to undertake. Guilt for the

impending sin of making love with another woman. But guilt for the impending suicide,

too.

In five days he'd know her soft words and embraces were lies.

It wasn't just Jesse's presence, though, that made her feel ill-at-ease. The *house*, itself, was claustrophobic in its rural upper middle classness. The

porcelain cherubs on the coffee table. The wedding pictures. The crisp neatness. The rose-colored loveseat.

The paintings of the Falls of the Ohio. The paintings of Jesus. The photographs of

mothers and fathers and siblings and grandparents and cousins on the walls. The way

they were like an assembly of generations hovering over her with grim expectations.

“Yes,” they seemed to say, “we’re so glad you had the decency to get married. But what

about children? Where are the baby pictures to hang on these walls alongside us? Breed.

Continue the chain.”

Expectations unmet. Pressure. Enough to make Ellie feel clammy. She cleared her

throat. “Time for me to go, love.”

“I suppose,” Jesse said, “I can’t keep you here forever. The trade show beckons.

Give me a call when you stop for the night.”

“I was, well...I was thinking of driving straight through.”

“Aren’t you leaving a bit late in the day for that?”

“I’m sorry...”

“Sorry?”

“I mean...I always try to leave for trips early. But I never get my act together to leave early.”

“You ask me, they should’ve paid for a train ticket. By the time you add up the gas

and the expense of the hotel, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to drive all that way.”

Think fast. Think fast. Think fa – “Makes all the sense in the world, if you want to squeeze two trips into one. They want me to give a presentation to a company in

Cincinnati that’s in the market for a new barge. Their office is along the way.”

“And they can’t just meet you at the trade show?”

“Well, you know how these companies are.”

Jesse shook his head. “They don’t treat you good, Ellie. You know that, right? I

don’t see why you can’t do a lot of these pitches over the Internet. Isn’t that what Skype’s for?”

“I-I’m sorry, Jesse. I’ll put my foot down after this. No more traveling. At least not

for a while.”

“Promise me you’ll stop and get a room tonight. You don’t need to be on the road all

that time.”

He was correct, of course. It was already five-thirty. It would take about six hours to

travel to the Hillbriar (not counting bathroom and meal breaks). She'd been up, doing

laundry and last minute packing, at five a.m. (It was the best time to smuggle the noose out of the basement and into her bag.) She'd be ready to go to bed after just a few hours on the road.

Things never came together as planned.

She'd had too many loose ends to tie up before leaving. On top of all the packing and

laundry, she'd indulged in having lunch with Alice, the co-worker she was fond of. The

one Ellie suspected might also...

* * *

They'd both ordered grilled chicken sandwiches at Big Boy. Their hands grazed

against each other when they both reached for the check. (They'd forgotten to ask for

separate ones.) Alice insisted on treating. Ellie felt herself blush. She giggled.

"*Blushing*, Ellie-May?" Alice said. (Alice was always calling her that.) "You've

been goofy this whole time. I think the waiter slipped some rum into your sweet tea."

Ellie had started to imagine that they were dating, that Alice was trying to be

chivalrous by paying. That's why she'd blushed. But she couldn't just come out and say

that. Her hunch that Alice was...not attracted to men...was just that – a hunch. She

wasn't...well... *certain* of where Alice stood on matters like that. Matters like that weren't intended to be spoken of, out loud. One could only type messages about them...at

midnight...on the social network.

"I'm just anxious about my trip," she said.

As she'd finished saying that, Pastor Carswell walked in the door (with all the

arthritic, white-haired church ladies in tow like a sexless harem). She tried to avoid eye contact.

"It's hard when they get in that condition," Alice said. "Harder, too, when it's your

uncle, instead of your mom or dad. I mean, if it was your mom or dad, you'd probably

have been down there months ago, right? You'd have been in the loop about all this. But

when it's your uncle and he's elderly and his kids are dropping the ball like this, well, it's hard to not go down there on edge. You'll be in my prayers, and so will your uncle."

Of course, Alice would be praying for a man who didn't exist; a character created by

Ellie to explain her impending absence to a coworker who knew damn well there wasn't

a trade show in West Virginia. Two lies told; each custom made for its recipient.

Ellie caught a furtive glance of Pastor Carswell. His ears had perked up when Alice

mentioned prayers and he'd turned his chubby neck in their direction, as far as the rolls of flab would allow. (Like he had some sort of super-hearing that could sense the dropping

of church lingo even in the din of a crowded restaurant.) If he'd overheard the story about the uncle, complications would ensue. He might talk to Jesse about it, and Jesse would

ask for an explanation, and then she'd be caught in her lie. Fortunately, the hostess

greeted the pastor at just that moment and led him to a roomy table of eight, off in a

corner, a safe distance from her small booth. The delicate web of lies wouldn't be broken.

The crisis had been averted.

* * *

"Ellie?"

Jesse had been saying something to her, but she hadn't replied. When she realized

this, she mumbled a half-hearted apology.

"You feelin' okay?"

"I guess I'm just, well, I guess I'm just preoccupied, is all. You know, with the trade

show.”

Jesse grimaced. “Maybe you shouldn’t go. It seems like this job has you wound up

lately. You work your ass off for these folks – preparing presentations for them until one or two a.m. Maybe this should be where you draw the line. Maybe there are some things

more important than selling river barges. You know that we could get by on my salary

alone, if we needed to. You’ve always talked about how you wanted to get more involved

in activities at church. You could do that, it wouldn’t be like you’d be sitting on your ass doing nothing. You could keep yourself busy with volunteer work.”

Panic. *He’s trying to stop me. Does he know? Does he know? Does he –*

“No!” It came out louder than she’d planned it. With more bitterness.

Jesse took half a step back. He looked at her with confusion. With disgust?

“I, I’m sorry,” Ellie said. “It’s...I mean...we can talk about this. About my leaving the company, I mean. When I get back. But I have to do this. You have to

understand...there’s no way I’m backing out now.” And she didn’t back out. She gave

him one last, perfunctory hug and slipped out the door with a quick but clumsy shuffle.

She marched to their Scion and groaned as she loaded it with her one, big suitcase. It was the car they’d gotten years ago because it could

accommodate a family. The car that only ended up accommodating Jesse's camping gear and her luggage. The car that squealed its

wheels as it left the driveway.

She felt self-conscious about the noise. Across the street, the Evensons were returning from work. Mrs. Evenson stared at her and frowned. Then her wheels squealed

yet again, this time as she braked. In her haste she'd nearly run over the Hamiltons' four year old son.

The boy looked up at her, wide-eyed, from his tricycle. Mrs. Hamilton rushed out her

front door to survey the situation. Ellie had no choice but to wait while the boy's

sausagey legs worked the pedals of his trike to get out of the street. The mother gave Ellie the hairy eyeball. When the boy had gotten back on to the sidewalk, she started to march out of her yard, toward the Scion. "Hey..." she bellowed. "Hey..."

Ellie cringed and pretended not to hear Mrs. Hamilton. The Scion coasted onward at

fifteen miles per hour.

"Hey!" the voice demanded, from behind her. "Hey! You come back here! Hey!

Hey!"

Ellie kept going.

"You watch where you're goin' from now on!"

She felt the weight of the near miss on her brow. She forced herself to examine the

road and the sidewalks – intensely study them – to make certain no other children were in her path. *What, she wondered, would it sound like to run a little boy over? Her brain started to stitch together an alternate version of events. Had I hit him, it would have probably sounded like I'd just hit a dog, except for the added noise of the crushed*

tricycle. There would've been lots of crunching and scraping and clanging and

scratching noises. Would the boy have cried? I'm so glad I didn't have to hear that. What must it be like for people who accidentally run over kids? They must spend the rest of their lives hated and despised. Do they move someplace else? Start over? No, silly – they went to jail. No, not jail – prison. Went there for a few decades and then, only then, started over someplace else (crawling through each day meekly and praying to never have their past discovered and –).

A horn blared behind her. She'd reached the stop light at the main exit from the

subdivision. She'd been there long enough for it to turn green, and the car behind her was impatient to get moving. *And I, she thought, am just as impatient, right? I don't want to stay in this town any longer than needed. I want to go to the Hillbriar.*

Why had they chosen a luxury resort in Leonard's Reach, West Virginia?

That had been Lori's idea. The Hillbriar was roughly halfway between their two

homes (though about an hour closer for Lori). It was sufficiently far away to seem like it was another world, but close enough so that it didn't require airfare. Lori had told her that the words "luxury" and "West Virginia" were

so rarely used in the same sentence that she *had* to check it out. It “suggests the ideal combination of romance and degeneracy”, she’d said. This had led Ellie to the dictionary to look up “degeneracy”. When she read the

definition, she felt it had been the right word. Degenerate meant having lost qualities that were desirable – whether they were physical qualities, mental qualities, or moral

qualities. The dictionary said the word meant “showing evidence of decline”; or, it meant

“having reverted to a simpler form as a result of losing a complex or adaptive structure present in an ancestral form”. Going from good to bad, Ellie reasoned. That was the gist of it. Going from moral to immoral. From being godly to being like an animal. Yes, the

word made sense.

But Ellie was more occupied with practical concerns. She wanted to do it someplace

away from southern Indiana...far away from the nearest city, Louisville, too. She didn’t want anyone she knew or anyone *related* to anyone she knew or anyone *who worked with someone she was related to finding her body*. The only way to ensure that was to leave the region.

The GPS told her that she had to cross the Ohio River bridge into Kentucky. She

already knew that, but it didn’t mean she could let herself daydream. The bridge

frightened her. Little speedy cars with out of state tags vied for lane position with tractor trailers and pickup trucks. She tried in vain to merge into the right lane to get onto I-64

East. No one would let her in. She pounded her palm on the steering wheel. Honked her

horn in protest. Jerks honked back, long and loud and hostile. She would have started

sobbing, if a minivan hadn't let her over at the last moment.

Once safely on I-64, she opened up the social network app on her phone. It chimed.

A new message from Lori: "Have u left yeet."

Chastened by her close call with the kid on the trike, she decided to not message

back while driving. She'd need to stop for gas at some point. She'd reply to the message then. (She only had half a tank. Filling up was on her list of things to do, but of course she hadn't done it.)

She considered what might be on Lori's mind. What sort of message would follow

"Have u left yeet ? (sic)" She tilted her neck to either side, and heard it crack. Was Lori having second thoughts? Would she follow up the message with an explanation that she

hadn't left Virginia yet, and wouldn't be? A message saying that if Ellie wanted to hang, she could hang alone? Was she going to postpone? Make a last minute retreat? *Please*, Ellie thought, *don't let it be that*.

* * *

Lori had left two hours ago. She'd meant to leave four hours ago, but there were

important preparations to complete beforehand.

The baby.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon,” her mother had said. “You visited him

two weeks ago.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I’m getting ready to go away for a while.”

“Away?”

Lori nodded. Smiled. *Go there, bitch. Just go there.*

“*Would be nice* for your father and I to go away, one of these days.”

She went there.

Lori lit a cigarette. Exhaled a puffy cloud. “Seems a little hypocritical to complain

about him. You wanted him.”

“This? Again?”

“Yes, this. Again. Because you never listen. You’ve *always* wanted him, so why

whine about having to take care of him? I was the one who wanted the abortion. If you’d

listened to me, you could be on a nice trip to Branson right now.”

Her mother glared. “If you came here to torment me, you can leave.”

“You don’t know anything about torment. Not the way I do.”

“Lori, please. Don’t start!”

“You weren’t the one who had to deliver him through a cunt that had already been

burnt hundreds of times!” Lori pointed to a picture on the wall. Gentle Jesus looking

down into a moonlit valley. “Burnt by Him!”

“Lori, *please!* Don’t start!”

“I gave birth to him, I have a right to see him. Even the courts say that.”

“Only when you’re well. Have you been taking your medicine?”

She’d taken the Xanax earlier in the day, so she nodded.

“That’s a lie. I can tell. A mother always knows. You haven’t been taking your

Zyprexa the way you should, have you?”

Silence.

She assumed that tone. Like a prison guard. “*Have* you?”

“It keeps me stoned.”

“Last time I checked your arrest record, that wasn’t exactly something you objected

to.”

“Why do you always throw that up in my face?”

“Because it’s always in our face, Lori! Our house has a reputation in this neighborhood. All the neighbors talk. We’ll never have a good name is this town again.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Don’t even say that, young lady. I’ve heard it too often...”

Lori’s voice grew unsteady. “I d-didn’t ask to be raped!”

Her mother rolled her eyes. “We’re back to that now, huh.”

“I thought He would be a kind husband, because He’s God. But that was just the

sweet talk beforehand. Once I agreed to be His concubine, I couldn’t say no to Him. He

took my arms away so I couldn’t fight back!”

“You *have* arms. You’re waving them at me now. How do you think you lit your

cigarette?”

“But I didn’t during the rape, Mom. He takes away body parts and then puts them

back when He’s done, so it looks like nothing happened. God *raped* me. You have to understand! He chose me. That’s why no other man will approach me. He’s marked me

as His chattel.”

“Lori...I think it’s best that you leave.”

“I’ll leave, but I’m taking Josh with me. There’s something he and I need to do

together.”

“Lori...you’re sick. Think about that. Come back another time when you’re not so

upset. I just put him down for a nap an hour ago. You know how hard it is for him to

sleep.” Mom positioned herself in the middle of the hallway. “You can come back later

and visit him. But not now, okay?”

She spoke to Lori in faux-conciliatory, slow, soft words – her now-I’m-talking-to-a-

lunatic voice. Bitch was trying to block the way to Josh’s room, too. That was *begging* for a beat down. Lori took another drag off her cigarette and tipped ashes onto the carpet.

“My Lord! *What are you doing?* ” Mom freaked. Acted like Lori had just taken a

dump on the floor. It was just a little ash, but it was enough to throw her off her game.

She bent at the waist to see where the ash had gone so she could clean it from her

precious carpet.

That’s why she didn’t see it coming when Lori jammed the lit end of the cigarette

into her cheek.

There was howling. Hopping. Mom bared her teeth, winced in pain, then let out a

sound somewhere in between a sob and a growl. Smoke trailed from the place below her

left cheekbone where Lori had jabbed the end of her Camel. A small, round black crater

formed where the cigarette had found its mark.

Then came the cries. Raspy, sick baby cries. It woke.

Mom waddled to the freezer and grabbed a handful of ice cubes. Wrapped them up

in a towel and pressed it against her face. “I’m gonna have your father take a picture of this burn. We’ll have you locked up in the loony bin again, for this, little girl!”

That’s when Lori put the cigarette back in her mouth and made a run for the baby.

He was there in the crib. They had his arms in tiny restraints to make certain he didn’t touch the...wound...atop his head. He writhed and seemed to struggle against them like a miniature mental patient.

Josh had been born with a series of deficiencies and deformities, which made

transporting him a major ordeal. He had been born without eyes. His left leg ended at the knee. His brain and skull hadn’t formed completely, resulting in a head that ended

abruptly just above the indentations where his eyes should have been.

The doctors said that, while he would be able to breathe, piss, and shit, he wouldn’t

be able to think or feel – not really. He’d have less awareness than a squirrel or a rat. He would need to be on a feeding tube, they said, because he

wouldn't even possess the
reflexes necessary to swallow.

The nurses tried to cushion the blow as much as possible, but the fact was
her baby

had been born a disfigured vegetable. He had no forehead or scalp, just a
shallow, fleshy pit sloping down from his eyebrows all the way to the back
of his neck. Most troubling of all – and most hobbling, in regard to travel–
was the fact that the glob of brain tissue that *had* developed had no bone or
skin to protect it. It was exposed for all to lament.

Such babies seldom survive birth. The doctors had braced her for that
likelihood, and

she'd accepted it. It would have been nature's way of doing what an
abortion should have done.

But when little Josh emerged alive (and, even more surprisingly, *stayed* that
way), the doctors wrapped his exposed brain tissue in a special protective
latex coating. It had to be periodically replaced. Visiting nurses came to
Mom's house and did the replacing.

They'd told everyone that, for his own safety, the child should never be
moved except in an emergency.

But, of course, this was an emergency.

There were medicines in tiny bottles with tiny droppers on the nightstand
next to the

crib, but Lori didn't grab any of them. Where she was taking the baby, it
wouldn't need

them. It would be better off this way. She tucked him in her arms, held him
close to her breasts, and dashed to the hallway.

Mom stood at the end, still holding the ice to her cheek.

“For God’s sake, put him down. You don’t know how to care for him.”

“I know exactly how to care for it. I’m going to do something for it that should’ve

been done a long time ago. Now get out of the way.”

The baby let out a brittle groan and shook its newly-freed arms.

Mom pulled a cell phone out of her pocket. Pushed three buttons. Paused. Caught

her breath. “Yes, my daughter’s mentally ill and she’s going to kidnap her infant son.

Hurry!”

“You *bitch!* ” Lori lowered her head and charged. “Move outta the way!”

Mom’s voice broke as she let out a confused wail. She flailed her arms and dropped

her ice, but stood her ground. During the collision Lori heard cracking and crunching

noises, then a sound like a breaking water balloon. The latex brain-covering had been

ripped open, and the baby’s shoulders and neck hung askew.

It screamed in Lori’s arms. She kept running, out of the living room, out the front

door. She had no car seat. This was not an oversight. The thing she’d taken from her

mother's house wouldn't need one.

She opened the trunk of her Camry and plopped it inside. That way, its cries weren't

so loud. When she stopped for gas, she cranked up her radio to drown them out.

After filling her tank, she checked her phone. Ellie was logged in. Was she still at

home? Sitting in front of her laptop? Sometimes she stayed logged in, on her phone. That had to be it. If not, it didn't bode well. Lori needed to know, so she asked: "Have u left yeet." She looked down at the message. A typo. Fuck it.

* * *

Ellie stopped for gas and food in Winchester, Kentucky. The sun had started to set.

The previously gray, grim stretch of highway took on a pleasing, soft orange hue. The

sunset leaked through the window of the restaurant, staining her hands orange. It caused a glare on her cell phone screen. She had to shift so she could see the correct buttons to push as she typed her message. "On the road for a little over an hour now. Stopping for

dinner. I know you don't like me saying this but...I love you." She smiled. It was as

though there were a million little windows in her brain. Sending a message to Lori made

her feel like all of them had been opened to let in fresh air. She took a long sip of her pop.

She needed a little caffeine.

She heard a loud whirring. A grimy plastic mannequin hand set a plate of fried

chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans down in front of her. Startled, she flinched

and hid her phone so no one would see the screen. She looked up. The waiter who'd

brought her food wasn't the same one who'd taken her order.

She'd been seated by a ruddy, husky young man in his late twenties named Ray. The

name tag on the new waiter's chest said his name was René. His left arm was artificial,

but functional. From all the whirring, she presumed there were gears and/or electronics

inside the plastic that gave it the capacity for movement. There was a massive sinkhole in his skull, just over his left eyebrow. He had no bottom lip, but spoke to her anyway.

She didn't want to tell the poor soul she didn't understand him. It would have been

useless. He spoke as though afflicted with a mouth full of marbles. No matter how many

times she asked him to repeat himself – three, four, ten, twenty – she wouldn't have

comprehended a single word escaping his mouth. So, she smiled and nodded instead.

Apparently satisfied, he limped off toward the kitchen.

In the past, she wouldn't have ordered fried food, but given she had less than a week

to live she decided she'd let herself gain a few pounds. The chicken was hot to the touch and scalded the roof of her mouth when she bit into it. She grabbed a napkin to wipe the grease off her fingers. It was like the chicken leg was *sweating* grease. But the grease tasted good. She dug her teeth in deeper, and found the meat was reluctant to leave the

bone.

She held on tighter with her teeth and jerked her chin to give her bite additional

strength. The poultry yielded. Now the chicken-flesh was simply warm and moist and

tender – no longer did it burn. She let out an involuntary, full-mouthed sigh. The chicken had been well-seasoned and well-fried. She swallowed before she'd fully chewed it up,

and the meat proved too big for her esophagus. She felt a fullness in her throat. She

wasn't able to swallow. In the interim, she stared at her plate – embarrassed.

René poured a fresh supply of Coke into her glass. She took a sip from it, hoping it

would help. Instead, she just felt the pop fall on top of the chicken, weighing it down

further but not helping it pass through. Now they *both* clogged her esophagus. Now there was *greater* pressure inside of her. She relaxed and

took a deep breath. Felt a tightness in her forehead and tension in her nerves. She let herself breathe. Slowly. In. Out.

The food went down. Slipped away down the slide of her innards. Relieved, she

sought to fill herself once again. She tore into the disembodied appendage in front of her, nibbling at tendons and ligaments to get the last bit of meat hidden behind them. When

through, she surveyed the aftermath: the chicken bones and shreds of skin and tiny wisps of mashed potato too small to go after and the juice that had leaked out of the green

beans.

She wanted more, but knew she should get on the road. She looked out the window.

The world was no longer orange-tinted. Twilight had arrived. Fluorescent street lamps

flickered into life by the roadside.

As René passed by her table she raised her hand. “I-I’m ready for my check,” she

said. He stopped, looked at her plate, and seemed to grin with nonsensical approval. Then he limped off toward the cash register.

As she dug into her purse for her wallet, René placed the check on the table. When

she looked up again, he was limping through the kitchen’s swinging double doors,

muttering to himself. As it turned out, two pieces of paper were on the table. One was a computer-generated check informing her she owed

Johnny's Chicken House \$11.47; the

other was a note written on lined paper (scrawled in a barely-legible hand).

YOUR PLANS ARE NOT THOSE OF GOD.

THIS IS YOUR ONLY WARNING!!!

TURN BACK.

PROCEED PAST THIS POINT,

AND YOU SHALL BE DAMNED WITH BLESSINGS.

NO PLAN FOR NON-EXISTENCE EVER WORKS.

THE ARC OF THE UNIVERSE IS LONG,

BUT BENDS TOWARDS DEGENERACY.

She trembled.

How did he know? He *saw*. That's how. He must have glanced at her screen before

she could hide it and gathered that she loved Lori. And yet, how did that explain the later comments? What did he mean by "damned with blessings"? How did he know she

planned to die? And what, in Heaven's name, was the meaning of that last line? She

found it truly puzzling. She'd only recently found out the meaning of the word

degeneracy. Through the first thirty-seven-and-a-half years of her life, she hadn't heard or seen the word. Now she'd been exposed to it twice in the last month. Peculiar.

She placed her credit card on the table, over the check. When René returned she

would have a chat with him about his rudeness. He could communicate in writing, if not

with speech. If necessary, she would force him to write down his answers to her queries.

She would demand to know why he'd written her such a nasty note. Then she would

complain to the manager. It was all well and good for the restaurant to hire a severely

disabled man to wait tables. Some states gave tax breaks for such hiring, and – in

principle – Ellie was for it. But this man's handicap clearly didn't stop with his limp or his speech impediment or his missing hand or the dent in his forehead. It was internal, as well. He was clearly insane and hellbent on forcing his delusions on her.

She fidgeted. Held the note in her hands. Re-read it. Belched. Waited on René to take

her payment.

But the hand that reached down toward her credit card wasn't a mannequin hand. It

was chubby and attached to a ruddy, husky young man in his late twenties named Ray.

She was about to ask what had happened to René. She was about to demand he be

reprimanded for writing such a venomous note, but when she looked down into her hands

she found no note at all. Just a paper napkin that had been twisted into a miniature rope by anxious hands.

* * *

I decided to give Eleanor a warning – by way of my angel, René. She feared me, you

see. Yes, Lori feared me, too – but her fear was different. Lori's fear was a fear that followed on the heels of agreeing to serve as my concubine and failing to fully accept all the consequences of that status. The sort of fear that came from knowing – not from

theory, but from experience – that, if it were my whim, I could rob her of her arms and legs. I could change her shape into something incapable of disobedience. If it were my wish, I could dissolve all of her body except her breasts, her cunt, and her lovely face.

She knew I had the ability and the right to stack one on top of the other and torture each in turn.

Hers, too, was the fear that stemmed from having given birth to my begotten son. It

was the terror that only came to those who'd carried my seed. Lori wasn't merely

frightened of me. She was traumatized by me. And that trauma led her to despise me and attempt to defy me.

Eleanor, on the other hand, feared me – not in my true presence, but on the basis of my reputation. It was a fear that led her to repress her sexual self for decades. It was a fear that led her to yearn for the ability to comply with

the biblical commandments she (falsely) assumed were my actual wishes. She'd been led to believe that I loathe

homosexuality because it is an abomination. But – as anyone who has ever taken a

glance at my concubines and children can testify – I love nothing more than abomination.

What do you think attracted me to Lori, in fact, if not for that abominable, deranged mind of hers? I love abominations so much that I can't help hoarding them. In my harem.

Among my children. My domain is a Palace of Abominations. This, perhaps, is the

greatest teaching I can share with you: the heavenly and the hideous are not separate.

They are joined together in a coitus so intense it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins.

Each reaches out to the other. The hideous needs the holy. Prays to it. Beggars for its intervention to heal a broken body and twisted brain. The hideous needs the holy because without the holy it would have no hope for redemption. Likewise, the holy has an interest in seeing to it that there is a proliferation of hideousness. Happy, beautiful people have no need of God. It is only when people are debased by degeneracy of the mind or body that they consciously seek me out. And I desire to be sought out. Worshiped.

For God to be relevant, degeneracy must reign. And it is not enough for the number

of deformities to grow over time. My wish is to bend the human genome in the direction of deformity. The deformities of each generation must be more grotesque than those of the generation that preceded it. Each child should be more appalling than its parents.

And so the cycle must continue and escalate until – at the end of history – we arrive at a destination of ultimate deformity; the place at which humanity has reached the peak of perversion. I shall perfect humanity in the only way it can be perfected, by making it perfectly monstrous. By placing it in a position where it can no longer be self-sufficient; a place of constant need. A place at which it must cry out in constant supplication.

You can see, then, how important Lori's child is in the vast scheme of things. Our

son – and all my children – are steps along the path to perfection. He must survive into adulthood. Not only survive, but copulate. Preferably with a conjoined twin, a

microcephalic, or some other genetic wonder. That is my goal for him.

Eleanor planned to commit suicide with Lori because she thought she'd be damned,

anyway, after indulging in pleasures with a woman (and she could no longer restrain

herself from seeking out such pleasures).

She was foolish. My wrath against the adulterers had nothing to do with the fact that they both happened to be women. It had to do with the fact that Eleanor had chosen the wrong woman to run off to West Virginia with. Lori was mine. Exclusively. Reserved for my use as I saw fit. She was my property, and no one plays with my things without my permission.

No one.

Captured

Trooper Connelly took a deep breath. He'd been called to the Morris house way too

many times over his career. Always for the same reason – the daughter. Hot piece of ass, but nuttier than a squirrel turd. Each time they dispatched him to that house, he took Lori Morris away in handcuffs and dropped her off at the hospital. Didn't seem to solve

matters, though. He was always called back in a few months. The whole thing seemed

pointless.

The mother wasn't a bad lookin' gal herself. Maybe ten years younger than him. Had

the same eyes as Lori, but with crow's feet along the side of them. The same nose as

Lori, only with a pair of bifocals perched atop of it. The same big boobs (except hers

sagged more, which was understandable). There was now a nasty cigarette burn on her

cheek (courtesy of the nutty daughter). But from a distance, it looked like a beauty mark.

All told, Connelly thought, she was a slightly flabbier, more wrinkled version of the hot daughter. But Connelly would tap it, if given the opportunity. He'd go after her before he'd go after the daughter, in fact. The daughter might be a seven or eight out of ten, but you had to deduct five points due to her nuttiness. After accounting for that penalty, he reckoned she was only a two or three.

The mother's voice was hoarse. She would sometimes cry convulsively and it would

sound like coughing. Connelly hated it when they cried. "Ma'am...can you try...try...to

calm...ma'am..."

"G-go after h-her..." the mother said.

Connelly stretched. Took a pad of paper out from his shirt pocket. "We'll find her.

We always do, don't we?"

The mother blew her nose and gave him a few slow nods as an answer.

That was good...calm her down. Let her stop bawling before taking her statement.

"You and I, we've known each other for a couple of years now, haven't we?"

"The baby..."

Connelly nodded. "I know...The dispatcher said there was trouble brewing over here.

But I need you to answer some questions before we go and start causing a commotion

about all this. I mean, you have to understand. We get calls about custody disputes all the time, and you said yourself that she's the mother."

The woman shook her head, as though disgusted. "You need to go now. We have

custody. I'll show you the papers. She's only allowed to see him *here*, when we can be around to supervise her. And she took him. And he's not like other babies. Go...go *now*. I, I think she hurt him. I heard things snap when she...when she left here."

"She hit him?"

The woman paused. Blew her nose. Rubbed tears away with liver spotted hands. “I-

it’s hard to explain, but I think he’s hurt, pretty bad. And I think she *meant* to hurt him!”

Shit. This wasn’t a routine take-crazy-hottie-to-the-hospital call. She wasn’t just

breaking dishes or windows this time. This was gonna be an actual investigation. Time to go from calm-witness-down-mode to get-witness-talking-mode.

“And you heard bones snap?” Christ, this wasn’t good news. Connelly didn’t know

the whole story, but he remembered something about the kid being all messed up

somehow or another. Lots of birth defects. Probably caused by the hottie smoking dope.

(*But maybe*, Connelly thought with an uncomfortable quiver down his spine, *caused by all the crazy pills she’d been prescribed.*)

“Y-yes I did. Please, go now. You can get my statement later. Just find her!”

“Is your daughter armed?”

“No. She’s no threat to anyone except the baby.”

“Looks like she was damned sure a threat to you, now.”

The mother brought her hand up to cover the cigarette burn. Her face started to take

on the same crimson shade that her nails had been painted. “What I mean is, she’s

mentally ill but guns aren't her style." Then she took her hand away from the cigarette

burn – maybe catching on to the silliness of trying to hide it, at this point. She now

pointed to it. "*This* is her style. This and raking her nails over your face and maybe, with a man, giving a kick to the groin. Nasty stuff, but not lethal. So don't you go shooting at her, you hear? Just catch her. Put her away for a good, long while this time."

"And, of course, there's the boy."

"Why, yes, of course. I mean, that's the main point. To get him medical attention.

He's...fragile."

"What's the child's name?"

"He's only a baby. He doesn't answer to his name yet."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm aware of that. But, for the paperwork I have to know. His name."

"J-Joshua."

"And the baby's last name?"

The mother coughed. "It's...Morris. Joshua Morris. Lori never told us the name of

the father, and no one ever came forward to claim paternity."

The cop scribbled in his notepad. "You said the baby was fragile. What do you

mean? In detail, that is?"

The mother shifted in her seat. Fidgeted.

She was embarrassed. Of course she was. No one wanted to talk about shit like this.

But Connelly knew this kind of thing tended to get taken more seriously if the kid was

handicapped. “Isn’t he, well, you know, *special* in some way? I hate to put it like this, but it might help get more sympathy for your situation, with the courts and with the media, if they know all the details.”

“He has several...conditions. Probably the worst one is called anencephaly. A birth

defect. He’s quite vulnerable. His brain didn’t form right, in the womb. The skull *and* the brain didn’t form right, that is. So he only has a tiny bit of brain tissue, and most of that is actually outside of his body because there’s no skull to cover it.” She bit her lip. Blew her nose some more. “He’s too young, right now, to get any corrective surgery done. So he’s

supposed to have a special covering on his head, where the skull should be, to make sure his brain doesn’t get injured – kind of an artificial skull. They have to keep his arms

restrained so he doesn’t mess with it. He takes several medicines each day for this, you know? When she took him, she didn’t even take those with her.”

Connelly nodded. Scribbled in his pad.

“The one thing I don’t understand is why she injured the kid if she was wanting to

kidnap him. I mean, if you don’t mind me sayin’ so, that doesn’t make much sense.”

She smirked. “It’s not complicated, officer. Really, it isn’t. She’s a lunatic who

claims Josh is the result of God raping her.”

Connelly cleared his throat. Coughed.

“Yes, I know it’s bizarre. But since she kidnapped her son, it probably will be good

for you to know the whole story, no matter how embarrassing. She wanted to get an

abortion because of this delusion. Obviously, we made certain that didn’t happen. To be

honest, I think she came here today wanting to kill her son. She was vague, but she said she wanted to do something she should’ve done a long time ago. And I wouldn’t let her

take him, you know? Anyway, I think that’s why she didn’t care if she injured him. My

gut tells me her ultimate plan is to kill him.”

“That would have been a good thing to say to the dispatcher.”

“Didn’t I? I don’t know. It was all so upsetting. I thought I’d mentioned it. Maybe I

didn’t, maybe I ...” She whimpered, hunched over, and started to cry once again.

“Ma’am...ma’am...I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to upset you. Now, listen...was he still

alive when she left?”

“Yes.”

“But injured?”

“Yes.”

Connelly looked up from his pad and examined everything he’d written.
Ran an

anxious hand through his bristly flat top. Cleared his throat. “Any idea
where she took off to?”

“None. She just said she was going on a trip.”

“What kind of car does she drive.”

“A white ‘89 Camry.”

“Christ. Can’t be going too far, in that.”

“The car only has 100,000 miles on it. We bought it for her from a widow
who only

drove it to church and back for the past twenty years.”

“Gotcha. Any friends out of state? You know...people who might harbor her
while

she’s on the run?”

“She’s not the kind of girl who makes friends. I’m sure you can understand
that from

having dealt with her before. She spent a lot of time talking to people on the
computer, though.”

“Good. Then her computer might give us some clues.”

“Sure...by all means, have people search her apartment. Look at the computer. I’m

certain you’ll find all sorts of incriminating evidence. But, most of all, save my

grandson!”

* * *

There was screaming and there was music and there was night and there was rain.

The storm tap danced across the top of the Toyota. Josh and the stereo seemed to be

in a contest to see which was loudest. The bawling was shrill, high-pitched, and gurgly.

Each time Lori nudged the volume dial to make the woman sing louder, the baby took its

screaming to a new decibel level. It was screaming even louder than it had when she’d

first taken it.

She snapped and started screaming, too. “Shuttup! Shut...up! ” She could feel her

throat burn after yelling, the way it used to burn after screaming at a concert. For a

moment, it seemed as though her voice would prevail as the loudest. But then it cracked

under the weight of its own fury. She started to stammer and weep. “Wh- Why the f-fuck

won't you die?"

She'd gotten onto I-64 West two hours ago. All the crying should have worn out

Josh's lungs. It couldn't have kept going like this on such a limited air supply. Yet it did.

She wished her mother could see all this. Then she'd believe Josh was the son of God.

Only its divine parentage could explain its continued survival.

She looked at the wobbly needle tracing her speed. The Toyota had held up well,

given its age, but its speedometer was no longer one hundred percent accurate. It lurched forward and back erratically, even as she held the gas pedal down at a constant rate. All she could tell was that she was going somewhere in between sixty-five and seventy-five

miles per hour. She knew just enough to feel assured she wouldn't get snared in any

speed traps. She sure as fuck didn't need that right now. No cop would understand the

necessity of putting her son in the trunk.

A guy passed her on the left. Had to be going ninety. He had the interior lights on

and he seemed to be fumbling for something. Looking into his car, through the

downpour, was like looking at a melting oil painting. She could make out a rough outline of him. Even the night and the rain and the speed couldn't

obscure the fact he was well-muscled. She pulled even with him. Turned on her own interior light. Honked at him.

He turned his interior light off. He didn't even look over at her, let alone honk back.

When God had claimed her as one of His wives, He cast a spell on all the men of the

world to prevent them from pursuing her. *Maybe, she told herself, he's not looking because if he took his eyes off the road, in this heavy rain, he'd be asking for trouble.*

But that was all wishful thinking. The truth was that God had chosen her, and she'd

foolishly agreed to be chosen, then He'd raped her, then He'd marked her as His

property. Then, just for good measure, He'd saddled her with a little piece of Himself. A disfigured reminder of a monstrous night.

Memories, like razor blades, started to slice trails through her brain. (*The sour,*

smoky stench of her own burning holes made her want to faint, but she couldn't, and each hole would be blistered and scorched from the flames, but that didn't stop Him...) No. Not now. She couldn't think about that stuff now. Not while she was driving.

She'd freak out if she let all the memories loose in her head while she was driving. She had a Lortab in her glove box. She took it. Then she turned the stereo volume up to the

highest level. Let the singer scream away the nightmarish past.

The baby screamed louder.

This had to end. The trunk wouldn't be enough to end it. The baby couldn't suffocate

that way. It *should* have suffocated that way. Wouldn't any other baby have suffocated that way? Was air getting in? Was the trunk closed all the way? She'd hoped she could

put the baby out of its misery. Let it gradually lose consciousness from lack of oxygen.

She'd thought the whole thing would be as painless as possible. She hadn't expected this.

A brown sign along the roadway announced an upcoming state park. (Which one,

she couldn't read through the sheets of rain.) Such places were typically nestled away in sparsely populated areas. No witnesses. She'd drive out there and bash the fuckin' kid's brains in. Hell, yeah – just fling it against the asphalt over and over again. Gentle murder wasn't working. She'd have to be brutal.

She took the exit and followed the curving road. Drove over fallen branches. Drove

under a canopy of foliage so thick that, for a moment, there was a pause in the pounding on her car roof before the rain-drumming started anew. There was a blur of road and a

blur of light and a turn to the left and a turn to the right and then an animal – a fucking *animal*, the size of a deer but looking more like a goat or a bull; no, having two heads, one of a goat and one of a bull – fuckin' *standin'* there, soaked, in the middle of the road.

And she let out a shriek and she avoided the beast but then the road curved too sharply

and she remembered that she'd been needing new tires for a while now and the road was

too narrow and...

Her whole world lurching...tumbling. Her stomach wobbling. Then an explosive

slam against the ground. A cracking against a tree. A scraping of branches. Then more

slamming ...then finally stopping.

She tried to breathe, but only drew in about half her usual air. She smelled gasoline.

She tried to get out, but she couldn't move. Even though there were no houses

nearby she instinctively tried to call out for help. She found she could not speak.

But Josh still screamed. The radio still played. There was screaming and there was

music and there was night and there was rain. Then a rumbling in the back. Then a

whirring. Deep, masculine grunts. Murmurs. Someone else – another adult – in the

wreckage with her. A man's voice, shushing the baby. A man's voice, cooing to the baby

and then mumbling unintelligibly.

Grunts. Then heavy feet hitting the ground. Steps. Feet limping through the brush.

More whirring. Then the door flew open, torn off its hinges. More whirring as a flashlight burned in her face. She could only see the man holding it in silhouette. He looked less

like a man than an eroded statue of one. He took the baby off of his shoulder and seemed to drop it.

The night air held Josh aloft, though. He levitated. Stopped crying. Grunted. Twirled

around, weightless, in mid-air. The figure holding the flashlight placed it back into his belt and took a pad of paper from his shirt pocket. In the faint shine of her headlights, Lori saw him get out a pen from behind his ear. Start writing. Whir-whir-whir went his

hand as he wrote.

When he'd finished writing, his hand whirred some more as he thrust the sheet close

to her eyes. Then he got his flashlight out of his belt with his other hand, turned it on, and bent over – illuminating his poorly-scrawled handwriting.

I WAS IN THE TRUNK.

WITH YOUR SON.

OBSERVING YOUR CRIMES.

I BREATHED THE BREATH OF GOD INTO HIS MOUTH

SO HE WOULD NOT DIE.

GOD KNEW YOUR PLANS AND SENT ME.

YOU HAVE VIOLATED HIS WILL.

YOU HAVE PLOTTED TO KILL HIS SON.

YOU HAVE SOUGHT TO LEAVE HIM,

YOU ARE A FUGITIVE FROM HIS JUSTICE.

I SHALL TAKE YOU, BODY AND SOUL, BACK TO YOUR
HUSBAND

FOR DISCIPLINE

AND MATING.

YOUR SON SHALL LIVE ON,

SO THAT HE MAY BEAR WITNESS TO THE TRUE GOSPEL.

NO PLAN FOR NON-EXISTENCE EVER WORKS.

THE ARC OF THE UNIVERSE IS LONG,

BUT BENDS TOWARDS DEGENERACY.

Then the wreckage was no longer wreckage, but instead an unblemished police car.

Lori's bones had been pulverized by the impact. Long patches of her skin had been

ripped off. She lay in the back, behind the metal grating. She'd been there – in that space reserved for prisoners – so many times before. But that didn't make any of this more

comfortable. Her baby was tucked away in a safety seat secured to the front. Red and

blue swirled around her.

She lost consciousness, coming to only briefly and sporadically in spasms of

nightmare. First, the red and blue lights became red and blue stars. Then, all was

blackness again. Then, strange new guides dragged her past fires. Past half-human

oddities perpetrating the most sadistic varieties of sodomy on one another. Then, all was blackness again.

Then she was in the throne room of a hideous Heaven, filled with wailing angels and

amputated wings. She lay broken, paralyzed, and mangled at the foot of God's throne.

Then, all was blackness again.

And each time she blacked out, she lost a little more of her memory. The name of her

hometown escaped her. Her own name escaped her. This rattled her, and she tried to

focus on keeping her wits about her. The key was to remember that her plan had been to

escape God by being sent to Hell. The escape, that was the important thing. Perhaps there was still a way.

When she awoke again, her husband sat on His throne, holding Josh in His arms as

He spoke to her.

Behold the adulteress! The concubine of God does now lay broken before her

husband. Her crime was that she would not bow before my will, would not accept my

torture. And now she shall forever dwell with me, prostrate before my glory. And I will know her, in whole and in parts. I have already re-assembled her into a more pleasing shape. A shape incapable of disobedience. She sought to kill herself. But I shall not let her die. Every breath will be torture for her, and I will heap punishment on top of that as oft as I feel the urge. And she shall continue to give birth to my children. Do you have anything to say for yourself, woman? Your new shape does not allow speech. Think the words and I will hear them.

Lori shunned the pain and fear from her consciousness so that God could hear her.

Just send me to Hell and be done with it.

God stepped off His throne. His radiance burned her as He approached. *Is that what*

this was about? You wanted to go to “Hell” ? And you thought that killing our son and committing suicide would get you there? Away from me?

There was a burst of light like an atom bomb in front of her, and suddenly God was

the height of skyscrapers. He held her in His hand and lifted her up to His face. When He laughed, it was as though a flame thrower shot right over her. Yet as much as she begged for it, death did not come.

* * *

Ellie felt like a wimp, not driving straight through to the Hillbriar. She'd hoped the

meal and the caffeine would give her some pep. But instead of infusing her with healthy, wholesome energy, they only fueled her anxiety. And she was

old enough to know that,

once she reached a certain threshold of nervousness, her body tended to react by

demanding she crash and reboot.

She'd gotten far enough out into eastern Kentucky that she'd reached the foothills of

the Appalachians. It was after dark now, and the mountains could not be seen. But from

past travels she knew they surrounded her. Stood tall, over her, like a crowd of

disapproving men.

Decent accommodations were scarce, this far out. But there was a state university in

Morehead. She could find a hotel there where she could stop for the night and get some

rest. She could use her phone to see if Lori had sent her another message. If she had, then that would encourage her to move ahead with their plans. If she hadn't...well...who

knew? Maybe she would have a "come to Jesus" moment like people were always

discussing in their testimonies at church. Maybe she would go to the nightstand, pull out the Gideons' Bible that had been tucked away there, and find new comfort in the onion

skin pages. Maybe it would be like when she was a teenager, when she closed her eyes,

opened the Bible to a random page, and discovered a message there that seemed meant

just for her. Maybe she would live.

So many possibilities. She had to stop thinking about all of them. They only made

her feel more exhausted.

Few cars traveled this stretch of Interstate late on a Tuesday night. The traffic was

mostly tractor trailers – all of them mammoth and slow, most of them adorned with some

Christian slogan or symbol. (Mudflaps bearing the name of the savior, the sign of the fish appearing under the hauling company's name, warnings that "Heaven is 'Real' and So is

'Hell'!" painted on the back of trailers so that they would face following drivers.) She'd only gone to community college, but she knew enough to be aware that the quotation

marks had been placed there by mistake (that proper writing didn't work that way), and

this gave her a feeling of superiority. Soon afterward, though, guilt replaced the

arrogance.

They may not know how to use quotation marks, but at least they're making sure

they're going to Heaven. They're not running away from their spouses to commit acts of abomination. They're not the ones who feel lost even though they know exactly where

they're going. They're not the ones who the church women disapprove of. Can I say the same? For Christ's sake, they belong here, in this part of the world. Can I say the same?

There were the tractor trailers, and there was the black road, and there were the white

dashes in the middle of the black road, and there were – rarely – the green signs telling her where she could leave it. When Ellie was this tired, her vision lost its focus. The

colors of the Interstate all started to twist and bend past their former boundaries, bleeding into one another, threatening to become one white-black-green fusion that would prove

utterly unnavigable.

She pushed the button to lower the window and let in some air. Shook her head.

Slapped herself, lightly, on the cheek.

Not much longer to go. Stay awake.

A sign told her Morehead was five miles away. She veered over into the right lane.

Slowed down to fifty. This gave her better control over the vehicle. Her vision unblurred, but in a matter of moments was *re* blurred. Signs told her of several hotels along the roadside. None of them offered luxury, but she picked the one that seemed – based on

reputation alone – to be the least-ratty. According to the sign, it was less than a half-mile from the Interstate exit. Another point in its favor. The less driving she did, the better.

There was a brief interruption in her worry – a sense of temporary relief – offered by

the arrival of the exit ramp. With no vehicles behind her, she could go as slowly as she wished. Ten miles an hour, five miles an hour. The road dipped lower and lower as it

curved in a semicircle into the town. She felt a gentle, soothing rock-a-bye sensation as her body tilted first one way in reaction to the turn, then another.

She paused at a red light. During the day, this would have been a major intersection

(at least, as major as intersections were, in this part of the world). Yet, late at night, it was all-but-deserted. Still, there were more streetlights in Morehead than there had been on I-64. That helped make things less blurry. Most of the stores were closed for the evening, but she saw the hotel up in the distance. There was a gas station and Cracker Barrel

restaurant adjacent to it. Good. She could refuel her car and her body in the morning.

She pulled up to the hotel's entrance. Put on her flashing hazard lights. It seemed like an empty gesture, given how abandoned the town was. But it was the polite thing, after

all. It indicated that she knew she wasn't allowed to park there indefinitely, that she was only parking there while she checked in.

She nearly fell out of the front seat. It felt good to stretch her legs. It would feel even better to get into bed. She slung her purse over her left shoulder and walked to the front desk. No one was there. The scent of cleaning solution was obnoxious in the air, and the tile near the entrance appeared not-quite-dry from a recent mopping. A television was

mounted to a wall in a lounge area across from the front desk. A late night talk show was on. Ellie recognized neither the host nor the scantily clad celebrity he was interviewing.

The young lady was quite attractive, though. Big breasts well-presented in a floral-print top. Short, spiky boyish purple hair. Tight, tanned legs sticking out of a knee-length green skirt. Demure but punky at the same time.

Yum.

“...you, ma’am?”

The kid behind the counter looked like he was in high school. Like he could have

been one of her Sunday School students.

“What’s that?”

He cleared his throat. “I said: ‘Can I help you, ma’am?’”

“Oh, yes...I need a room.”

The boy started typing into a computer terminal. “How many nights?”

“Just one.”

The television in the lounge area erupted in applause. A saxophonist, drummer, and

guitar player started playing a segue to the commercials. The boy didn’t bother looking

up at her from the computer terminal as he began to run down a list of additional

questions and concerns.

“Smoking or nonsmoking?”

She’d given up smoking ten years ago, but decided she might indulge while she was

there. “Smoking,” she said. The word felt heavy and tasted sour as it crept out of her

mouth. She knew smoking wouldn’t kill her immediately, but it still felt (however

irrationally) like she’d just taken another step toward suicide and damnation.

“I’ll need to see your driver’s license and the credit card you’ll be using.”

It took her longer than she’d hoped to fish her wallet out of her purse (and longer still to fish the appropriate cards out of the wallet). It was awkward, yes, but in a matter of minutes it was done and she was lugging her suitcase out of the car. She wheeled her

granny panties and pajamas and bras and toothpaste and noose over cracked asphalt and

speed bumps and into the lobby.

In the lounge area, the late night talk show host was now interviewing an athletic-

looking young man. The demure punk sat silent on the far end of the couch, looking

appropriately ornamental as she listened to the young man talk about a recent success on the playing field. Behind the front desk, the boy who had checked Ellie in was eating a

donut and sipping an energy drink as he glanced at the screen.

The suitcase wheels made a dull whirring noise, occasionally punctuated by dips in

and out of tile grooves. Ellie didn't remember pressing the up button, but the elevator

chimed, nonetheless. She walked in and noted that it was far dingier than the lobby. Tiny bits of graffiti, scrawled in pen, festooned the walls.

Jimmy Henderson Farted In This Elevator, September 24th, 2007.

Trust in "GOD"

Homosexuality is an abomination

My boyfriend has bigger tits than your girlfriend

All you need is (my) COCK

A crude drawing of a thick, stiff, ejaculating penis accompanied the latter. It was

drawn with heavy, dark lines that seemed to have been traced repeatedly – perhaps in an

effort to make it extremely difficult to wash off, perhaps because the artist was (for some reason) enraged at the time he drew it.

It's all a trick, she thought. They show you the freshly-cleaned lobby to lead you to think it's a decent place. But they don't bother cleaning the elevator because they know that once you see it, you're already stuck here.

At least the room itself wasn't as flagrantly tainted. (No dick graffiti.) She'd chosen

a smoking room, and so she knew to brace for the smell. Everything was – technically

speaking – *clean*. But the furnishings showed signs of heavy wear. The bed spread was frayed. The fake-leather chair near the work desk had two cigarette burns in the cushion, revealing yellow stuffing underneath.

She unzipped her suitcase, retrieved her charger and set to getting more juice to her

smartphone. She wanted to call Lori's cell. She wanted confirmation that she'd left

Portsmouth, or maybe even that she was already there at the Hillbriar. She wanted to talk dirty to her. She wanted to exchange photographs, the way they had done so often in

recent weeks. She opened up the social network, but found no message after "Have you

left yet?" In fact, there wasn't even an indication that Ellie's response to that message had been seen. When Ellie tried calling her, nothing happened. She heard no dial tone.

No busy signal. No static. No disembodied voice telling her the phone had been

temporarily disconnected.

Nothing.

She double-checked her reception, fearing the mountains had cut her off, but the

phone had three bars. Desperate, she tried the land line (an ancient, avocado-colored

device with gray buttons and faded white numbers).

Nothing.

Minutes ago, her brain had demanded sleep. Now, her brain demanded answers. Was

Lori blocking her calls? Could that really be happening, after all those late night heart to hearts?

She felt like a fool. That must be exactly what was happening. In her head, the

jigsaw pieces started to come together to form an ugly picture. No wonder Lori (if that

was even her real name) would never tell Ellie that she loved her. It was a subtle signal, but a signal Ellie should have picked up on nonetheless. A hint that, despite all

indications to the contrary, the Internet play was just play. A hint that all of this talk about sex and death was just talk. Just empty fantasizing.

Ellie imagined a future confrontation: someday, a month or two from now, Lori

would show up again. Lori would message her, flirt with her, maybe even try to start

some cybersex...all as though none of this had ever happened. And Ellie would unload

her anger about having been stood up, and Lori would affect astonishment at the very

notion that Ellie had taken any of this seriously. Would explain that even her insistence it had been real had been part of the fantasy. How dense could she be?

It had been like that, before, online. Three years ago, Ellie had engaged in another

dalliance on the social network – someone who'd told her she was an eighteen year old

girl from Alabama (“...just had my birthday yesterday...”), but who turned out to be a

fifty year old man. He only admitted his deception when she pressed for more contact.

After a flurry of intense cybersex chat sessions, she felt herself falling in love. Asked for a phone number.

She slipped down to the basement, late at night, to make the call. Oh how her heart

pounded when she entered the number in her cell phone! Oh, how disappointed she was

to hear a mincing, gravelly falsetto on the other end. She dry heaved. Started shaking and crying. Then, as quietly as she could, she cussed him out.

She'd let her guard down in those chats. Confessed desires she couldn't confess

anywhere else. There had been something like intimacy shared. When she called the man

a perv for impersonating a woman online, he dropped the falsetto and called her a perv

back. Said he might like to pretend to be a woman online but that *she* had a fantasy about sleeping with a “barely legal” girl. “Who's the bigger perv, sweetheart?” he said in a

Southern, smokers voice. “The way I see it, you're basically a child molester!” Then he

hung up.

She'd felt like a fool and felt her soul scourged by deep and abiding shame. She'd

asked herself the question, over and over: *am I a child molester?* She'd come to find out she hadn't really been talking to a "barely legal" girl, but she'd *thought* she'd talked to one. She'd fantasized about having sex with her, and the girl's youth (only one day

removed from seventeen!) was undeniably part of the appeal.

And the transvestite had seemed so damned convincing, online. Had acted so lost, so

hungry for a strong hand to guide her. Maybe Ellie had been attracted to her because she was one of the few people (online or in real life) who seemed more fragile and clueless

than she was. Learning the truth had been a disappointment. And that was something

Ellie had to reckon with, she'd been disappointed she hadn't had cybersex with a barely

legal girl.

She wondered again now: *Am I a child molester?*

A voice, scratchy and Southern – the voice of God, or the voice of the transvestite, or

both mixed together – answered her: "Thou art an abomination."

She had to pee. Before she squatted on the toilet, she looked in the huge mirror over

the sink. She was too pale and too thin. She was glassy-eyed and straw-haired. She didn't look like a human being. She looked like a cheap, dollar store doll. Not a Barbie, but an imitation Barbie. An inferior knock-off. A copy of a copy.

She washed up and went to dry off on a hand towel. But the maid had "neglected" to

supply her room with towels. Her wet hands dripped over her shirt and jeans as she made

her way to a small utility closet next to the bathroom. Therein, she found an iron, a small ironing board, a coat rack, and hangers. On a shelf over the coat rack, she discovered six towels of various sizes and – to her great surprise – a pack of Marlboro Light 100s and a Bic lighter adorned with the logo of the Cincinnati Reds. Maybe the maid had taken a

smoking break and had forgotten about the Marlboros. Maybe the last occupant had been

trying to quit smoking and placed the pack there as a way to hinder easy access. However they got there didn't matter. Now the pack was in her hands and, moreover, it wasn't

empty. Four smokes remained. She immediately pulled one out, lit it up, and sucked in a

lungful of calm.

She tapped ashes into a glass ashtray, then brought it over to the nightstand. She felt

better. She wasn't yet beginning to rest, but the gears in her mind sufficiently slowed so that she was now *eligible* for rest.

She clicked on the TV, looking for the same talk show that was playing down in the

lounge area. Looking for that same sexy celebrity with the short, spiky boyish purple hair and the lovely breasts and the delicious legs. She caught a glimpse of her, but only a

glimpse, before the hotel's satellite reception started fading in and out. She took a deep drag off her cigarette. Turned off the TV. Tapped more ashes into the ashtray.

The quiet wasn't good for her. The road had been exhausting, but the necessity of

paying attention to traffic had offered at least some mild distraction from negative

thoughts that crawled around her brain like ants through spilled sugar. Now the thoughts were fully unrestrained, and held dominion over her. Lustful, shameful thoughts followed by thoughts of self-disgust. Then came the cheerleading thoughts – attempts to fight off the shame by reminding herself that, outside this corner of the world, a woman wanting

to be with a woman was okay. At least, *more* okay.

Maybe she didn't have to kill herself. Maybe she would go east on I-64, but instead

of stopping at the Hillbriar she would continue on to the coast. To some big city out

there. That's exactly what she'd do. She had five days worth of professional clothes. She would start over. True, she wasn't a kid anymore. She wouldn't have any local

references, either. But she wasn't too old to start over. She had her laptop with her. She would start looking for jobs on the coast. Somewhere with lots of other lesbians.

Someplace where being a lesbian wasn't at all frowned on. She'd research which city on

the coast was the most tolerant toward that kind of thing. Surely, on the coast there would be employment for a lesbian with experience selling barges.

But at some point she'd have to tell Jesse. And he would be shocked, at first. Then

he'd get mad. Maybe she wouldn't have to tell him the gay part – at least not right away.

She could just say that she needed to get away. That it wasn't him, it was her. That she wasn't really the marrying kind, despite their nineteen years of marriage. He would make assumptions that there was another man. He would probably run after her. He'd be

relentless. Find her.

He'd find her and get the Bible out and start to tell her why she was committing a

terrible sin. He'd tell her that the entire church was praying for their marriage. That since God had joined them, no one except God could sever their tie.

And, he'd be right. Or would he?

Was there such a thing as God?

It was a crazy question to ask. God was the foundation of everything – had been the

foundation of everything since she was a little girl. It was like asking if there was such a thing as America. Such a thing as Indiana. Such a thing as parents.

And that train of thought triggered another, unwanted, question. What would *her*

parents say about all this? She stubbed the cigarette butt out in the ashtray. Let out a chuckle and couldn't help but be surprised by the weakness and raspiness of the sound

that escaped her throat. She was okay with being a shitty wife, because – if she was really honest with herself – she'd never aspired to be a good one. But now she realized that she was a shitty daughter, too, and that epiphany stung.

But there was no way to deny it. After all, this was the first time she'd given any

thought to how her plans impacted her mother and father. She'd contemplated suicide

long and hard for many months and only found herself considering the impact on them at

this late stage. If *that* didn't provide evidence of her carelessness, her disregard for them, then what would? She was a bad daughter, and now it was too late for her to transform

into a good one. She'd made too many decisions that ran counter to the way she was

raised to be a good daughter. Besides, her parents had grown too senile to participate in any sort of game-changing heart-to-heart.

She hadn't been close to them since middle school. Conversations between her and

her parents were superficially pleasant, when she visited twice a year and phoned twice a month. They were old now and had moved to Florida, so they could be closer to Destin.

They'd been much older-than-usual when they'd had her. They'd struggled a long time

with infertility, and called Ellie their "blessing". She was their only child.

They were closer, in age, to grandparents than parents. This made them more

conservative than most parents. They'd wanted her to marry a godly man, bear godly

children, dote on godly grandchildren, then fall into a godly grave.

And why not? Maybe they weren't being closed-minded or repressive. Maybe they

were simply relying on a way of life that had proven its worth over the course of

centuries. Maybe traditions weren't such bad things. Maybe self-denial wasn't such a bad thing. For example, if she'd practiced self-denial and not looked for online sex chat

sessions with other women, she would have never had the experience with the fake

teenager.

By seeking to engage in acts of abomination, she'd put herself in a position to be

hurt. Perhaps, if there was a God, the incident with the transvestite was His way of

punishing her for violating nature's order.

God was perfect, therefore His universe was perfect. Nothing happened by mistake.

Even the fact that she was suicidal was part of the divine plan. But what purpose could

her misery (and possible self-destruction) serve?

Her hands shook as she lit another cigarette. Maybe God wanted her to die so that

her sin could not contaminate any other woman. That could be it. Yes, that made sense.

Suicide as a sort of self-imposed quarantine.

But the emotional pain en route to suicide: what was the purpose of *that*? Why could she not simply kill herself joyfully and be done with it? Why did she suffer a constant, ugly gray ache in her head?

All pain had a purpose. When she was a child, she'd had an intense pain in her

stomach. And the purpose of that pain was to send the message that her appendix was

about to burst. The doctors took it out, just in the nick of time. Pain had done its job. It had sounded the red alert.

Maybe the emotional pain was there to bring her – literally – to her knees. To knock

her down a few pegs, so that she wouldn't die before first acknowledging the superiority of the tried and true path that had been passed down one generation after another.

The path of the Bible.

She was, at this moment, on the verge of tears. She took another deep drag off her

smoke, then opened the nightstand drawer. Picked up the faded, worn, and tattered

Gideons' New Testament.

She started to flip through the book and pick a passage at random. But as her thumb

worked its way through the pages, she discovered a gospel tract tucked inside – a hidden leaflet. Under the title (*He Wants Us Broken*), there was a pen-and-ink drawing of a bald man with a sparse beard whose contorted face was the flag of agony. He only had healed

stubs where his arms and legs should've been. His eyes looked all fucked up – like a

goat's. He drooled and bawled, and even the sputum and tears looked – in their own way

– malformed; oozing down his face in weird globs rather than straight trails.

The drawing was repellent, but the title...there was something about *the title* that rang true. She flipped over the cover and read the text on the first page.

GOD WANTS US BROKEN!

He wants us broken *and* freakish. And insane. Addicted to drugs

and addicted to sexual abomination!

Yes, this is what God WANTS. What He DEMANDS. Because if we

didn't suffer such afflictions we wouldn't need Him. The more

afflictions we have, the more we need Him. And God DEMANDS that

we both need Him AND acknowledge our need of Him.

The more we need Him, the more we pray to Him. First Thessalonians, chapter five verse seventeen *commands* us: “Pray without ceasing”. And the only way to *pray without ceasing* is to be in *agony without ceasing*; to be unceasingly broken and unceasingly freakish.

At the bottom of this page, there was another pen and ink drawing – this one of a

Catholic priest performing last rites on a gnarled, emaciated old woman. A family

surrounded the bedside, kneeling with their heads bowed and hands clasped tightly

together (as though cuffed in that position).

The text sounded outrageous. Blasphemous. It countered everything she’d ever been

taught. Yet, it *did* quote scripture. And it provided some reassurance to her at an hour when she desperately needed it. All of those aspects of herself that she thought were bad, that God disapproved of, might actually be the very aspects of her that He loved.

The tract hadn’t yet convinced her. But, in a sense, it did something more important

than convincing her. It comforted her. She flipped to the next page.

MORE PROOF – TO CONVINCE THE SKEPTICAL!

1. More Scriptural Proof:

- Jesus compared Himself to a mighty boulder. “Whoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken, but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.” – Luke 20:18

- “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” –

Matthew 5:5

- “...if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish...And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish...” –

Matthew 5: 29-30

2. Scientific Proof

Science is yet another demonstration of God’s plan for us. **The arc of history is long, but bends towards degeneracy!** We now know that the universe started as perfection: a single block of matter, united and whole. But then it **broke** into billions of inferior pieces. From the moment we come into existence, **we are already broken** – a shard of a shard of a shard. God’s plan breaks us down even more. If we live long enough, our body will **break down**. As we grow very old, our **mind** breaks down. Then, after we die, we break down even further. Time breaks us down, flies break us down, worms break us down until

we are merely a tight leather shroud around a frame of bone. Until we are **just** bone. Until we are just powder – pulverized when our graves, themselves, betray us and shift with the tectonic forces of a spastic Earth.

Ellie didn't know how long her hand had been trembling. She didn't know how long

she'd been taking puffs on her cigarette without tapping off the ash. All she knew is that her thigh was burning. She'd been shaking so violently that she'd flung ashes and cinders onto her jeans. They'd burned a tiny hole through the cotton, and caused a smudge mark

when she rubbed the ashes off.

The arc of history is long, but bends towards degeneracy!

She'd seen that sentence earlier that evening. In the restaurant. At least, she'd

thought she'd seen it. But here it was again. She stubbed the cigarette out into the ashtray and put both of her hands on the tract. She ran her fingers over it, to make certain it was real. She placed it right under the nightstand lamp, to verify the print said what she

thought it said.

It did.

She moved on to the next page.

3. Evidence From Your Own Heart's Yearning

Look deep into your heart. You **want** to be little and yielding and

sick, because this removes you from life's burdens. (And did not Christ, Himself, say "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." – Matthew 11:28.)

God delivers those of us who are heavy laden with the yolk of existence. He does this through the blessings of decay.

HE SEEKS A MILLION NEW MARYS

This is the age of the New Gospel. A clarification of the **True** Gospel. The scribes of the Roman Empire co-opted Christ's message. Re-wrote whole passages of it to serve their own decay-denying purpose. Only small fragments of the actual words of Christ and the Apostles survived the purge – those quoted above.

God has decided to interact with the world in a new fashion. After Christ's mission failed, He decided to enter the world through more than one portal. A single Mary would not do. Instead, there must be one million. Rather than **telling** people about the blessings of degeneration, we must **show** them.

All of the new Marys shall be bound in servitude to their husband, the Lord. All of them shall give birth to one monstrous offspring after another. This, the Lord has decided, will be the Degenerate Gospel – a Living Gospel to be seen and heard and felt and experienced, rather

than merely read. A Gospel that will create even more Gospels after it.

A living, breathing testimony to the broken-freakishness of the universe! A testimony the world will be unable to avoid!

If you would like to be a vessel for the True Gospel, all you must do is fall to your knees and call out to the angels: “I give my womb to the Gospel!” They will then begin to observe you from behind the curtain of infinity. If they deem you degenerate-enough for God’s plan, they will bring Him down from His Palace of Abominations to lay with you.

This part seemed particularly strange. She didn’t understand all of it, and she wasn’t

sure she wanted to. She considered tossing the tract in the trash, but decided not to

because it had used that sentence: “The arc of history is long, but bends towards

degeneracy!” The last time she’d seen that, the note had disappeared. So she felt uneasy with the idea of just throwing it away.

Her intuition told her something valuable might be lost if she threw it away. There

might come a time when she’d need it – if for no other reason than to confirm that she

had, in fact, seen it. To confirm that she wasn’t crazy. The fact that the sentence had

disappeared once made its reemergence almost-miraculous.

She flipped this page, the last, and read the back cover.

HE SEEKS AN ARMY OF ANGELS!

New angels shall be needed to serve as God's ambassadors to humanity. Like conquering worms, they shall wriggle into the ears of the public and whisper God's message for the world. This is not a mission without peril. Our enemies will endeavor to slice the angels apart. But when they do so, the amputated aspects of our conquering worms shall move of their own volition! Thus, in severing us, our enemies will only help us grow. Like the hydra, we shall grow. And Brokenness, and Freakishness, and the Blessings of Decay and Degeneracy shall grow in our wake.

Then, a final pen-and-ink drawing: a man-sized worm riding a heavily-armored war

horse into an ancient city. A crowd of well-wishers were depicted in the foreground,

dressed in robes. They tossed palm branches and flowers at the horse's hooves. A close

inspection of the background revealed more sinister images. Men in togas falling on their swords. Women in nooses dangling out of the high windows of distant minarets and

battlements. A gang of children crouching over the body of a dead dog, devouring it.

A mailing address (to a P.O. Box in New York) and an email address (to a gmail

account) were written in smaller print at the very bottom of the back cover. Ellie ignored those, though. Focused, instead, on the war horse and the worm. Traced her acrylic

finger nail over the lines of that drawing, until she fell asleep.

Faith

When Ellie awakened, she felt hungover. She lay in bed longer than she should've,

gathering up the gumption to start her day.

A heaviness and an achiness lingered in her skull. She was exhausted (despite having

slept). She felt sick to her stomach (despite the fact she hadn't drunk alcohol). She felt restless (excessively restless, even by her standards). But she didn't feel dehydrated, as she had the two times in her life she'd *actually* been hungover. Nor was she trembling, as she had been during that *first* hangover, when she was seventeen.

That was the time her friend, Melanie, had smuggled a jug of gin out of her parents'

liquor cabinet. They'd drunk it together and had a sleepover – just the two of them – in the basement. Under the cover of darkness and sleeping bags, they'd held hands and

made out. She remembered that part. Even all these years later, she remembered it.

Melanie hadn't remembered it, though. (Or at least, *claimed* she hadn't remembered it.) Said she'd gone into a blackout. Ellie had resented that fiercely. There'd been

closeness, confessions. Hell, they'd said they'd loved one another. But then it had all

been yanked away from her when Melanie said she didn't remember any of it. And then

she'd said she had homework to do before Monday, and she'd packed her things and

drove away in her little piece of shit Corolla.

And, after that day, she wasn't Ellie's friend any more. All of a sudden, she stopped

talking to her.

Ellie's cell phone was on the nightstand, charging. She reached over, picked it up,

and checked the social network. No new message from Lori. She clicked on Lori's name,

curious to see if she'd posted anything new on her timeline. She hadn't. The last thing on there was a picture of a shirtless hunk – some movie star, apparently – posted yesterday morning.

She'd said she was bisexual. Ellie remembered that. But seeing that she'd posted a

photo worthy of a romance book cover was discouraging. She'd claimed to have had

more sexual experience with women than Ellie had. And yet, that picture she'd posted

looked like the sort of thing a bored housewife would post.

The buff dude's picture was another piece of evidence to support the narrative that

had been incubating in Ellie's mind since last night. Lori hadn't been serious about any of this: it was just a game. Hell, it might be even worse. Not a game, but a malicious trick.

Maybe Lori was laughing her ass off about it. Ellie wondered if that was exactly what she was doing that very moment.

She'd slept in her clothes. There was still an unattractive smudge of ash surrounding

the pin-prick hole that had been burnt in her jeans. There was also a sour scent around her armpits. Her hair must have looked messy, out of place, and neglected. But she decided

she wasn't bothered by such things.

She'd brought nice clothes for this trip. She'd packed business clothes, of course, to

render the charade realistic. But she'd also packed sexy clothes – or at least, as sexy as she let herself get. Some jeans that she thought hugged her hips provocatively. No tops

with plunging necklines, but some that provided at least a decent hint of cleavage.

Clothes that were only five years out of fashion (which was a favorable contrast to the

rest of her casual wardrobe, which was – on average – at least ten years out of fashion).

And yet, she decided to not change into them. Part of her liked the fact that road

grime and sour sweat still clung to her. It suited her mood. Maybe it suited *her*.

She smelled foul, yes. But maybe she *was* foul. Maybe God had made her that way,

and delighted in her foulness. When she finally rolled out of bed, she noted with a lazy lack of surprise that she'd somehow managed to sleep on *He Wants Us Broken*. It was crinkled and creased, but was otherwise undamaged. She lurched to the edge of the

mattress. Sat and skimmed the tract to make certain it read as she remembered it.

It did.

She tucked it in her back pocket.

She wondered where the Gideons' New Testament was, and didn't find it until she

had already packed, put on her shoes, and was ready to check out. It had somehow,

during the course of her tossing and turnings, migrated under her pillow. She only

discovered it when she examined the bedding for lost earrings. She could no longer

remember if she'd worn earrings the day before or not. So she erred on the side of

checking. She always erred on the side of checking.

She replaced the Gideons' New Testament in the nightstand, back where it belonged.

She imagined the maid would appreciate things being returned where they belonged. But

she decided to take the cigarettes and lighter with her. Smoking soothed her.

She had a ritual whenever she left a hotel room. She would scour it, over and over, to

make certain she'd left nothing behind. Jesse always hated when she did that. Told her

she had OCD, and cited the fact that *even* she knew she *never* put clothes in a hotel's chest of drawers, but *always* checked them anyway to be certain she hadn't – for some odd reason – abandoned her practice of leaving all her clothes in her suitcase. And

checking once wasn't enough. She felt the need to do it three times. *After all, she thought, when I leave this hotel room I'll never, ever return. So I need to make certain I don't lose anything.*

After all the checking was through, she picked up the receipt the hotel had slipped

under her door during the night. Ninety-five dollars. It hardly seemed worth it.

Then she rolled her bag to the door, to the elevator, to the front desk. The young man

from the night before was no longer there. A heavy young woman with dyed-blond hair

stood where he had. The television in the lounge area played The Weather Channel. The

young lady on the screen was reciting the temperature in Tucson. Her neckline was far

too high to be pleasing, but Ellie could tell there was a bounty underneath the dress. The hemline stretched down to her knees. Too far, in Ellie's estimation.

But she wore makeup fit for a harlot, and that led Ellie to suspect the modesty was a

charade. She daydreamed about ripping that dress off. Cutting it off with a knife, to be exact. Daydreamed about pulling her hair and forcing her to the ground. Forcing her to

stay there. Making sure she could never, ever leave...

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

"I'm checking out," Ellie said.

"Yes...you mentioned that. And I asked you...are the charges on your receipt correct?"

"Huh? Oh...oh yeah." Ellie tried to force a cordial smile, but felt her face resisting.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Oh...no."

"Then you can go."

She wheeled her bag out to the parking lot.

There was something about being outdoors that felt uncomfortable, even disturbing.

The temperature had plummeted overnight and the chill hadn't yet been burned away by

the sun, but that wasn't it. Maybe it was that she could see the mountains now – yes, they were only foothills but they seemed like mountains, to her. They encircled her and the

hotel and the small city. Their presence affirmed that she'd traveled so far the geography had changed. That she was really trying to pull this off. This secret sex. This suicide.

She'd come all this way, had made this degree of commitment to the enterprise, and

she still had no guarantee that Lori had done the same. She opened the Scion's back

hatch, heaved her bag up into it, and slammed it shut. Then she opened the driver's side door, heaved herself up onto the seat, and slammed it shut. There were errands to attend to. Eating. Gassing up. Her car and her body were both machines that needed fuel.

Cracker Barrel was the closest place, and she'd always liked their food. It wasn't

such a bad restaurant. The décor was familiar. But she was young and by herself and a

sinner and everyone else there on that Wednesday morning was old and gathered in

groups and pious. She observed more than one table bowing their gray heads to say grace

before devouring their plates of eggs.

She took *He Wants Us Broken* out of her back pocket. Re-read it. Who were the old people praying to? Jesus, the compassionate Christ (who healed the lame) or another kind of Christ, entirely (to whom healing was blasphemy)?

Sure, they *thought* they had been praying to the compassionate Christ. But who were they praying to, *really*? She looked at the tract again. Its claims, on the one hand, seemed so unlikely. So out there. And yet, if you looked long enough at the arthritic, wrinkled, praying hands that surrounded her, it was impossible to refute certain points.

If we live long enough, our body will **break down**.

One of the old women looked up after praying and spotted Ellie staring at her. She

glared back. Ellie pretended to look toward the kitchen instead. A moment later a

disembodied arm and hand appeared in front of her, pouring water into the waiting plastic cup. “M’name’s Ronnie,” the man said with an Appalachian twang, “and I’ll be your

server this mornin’. Can I get you some coffee? Orange juice?”

Ellie flinched and instinctively slapped her hand over *He Wants Us Broken*. It was still her secret. She wasn’t yet ready to let anyone else see it. Besides, the picture of the sorrowful amputee on the cover was bound to lead to misunderstandings.

Ronnie had the same build and complexion as the waiter at the chicken house in

Winchester. Round and ruddy. Only he had thick glasses (and the one in Winchester

hadn’t worn glasses at all). Also, he wore a crew cut, while the other had a fuzzy head of hair approximating a woman’s perm.

Ellie asked for coffee.

Ronnie smiled. “And will you be takin’ any cream and sugar with that, ma’am?”

Ellie shook her head.

“Alrighty then, I’ll be gettin’ that right out to you. And are you ready to order?”

For two or three seconds, the words didn’t compute. Order? As in “order around”?

As in “tell someone what to do”? Yes, she was ready to give orders. Especially to the

weather girl on the TV back at the hotel. After cutting the dress off her, Ellie would order the skank to get on all fours and crawl up into her lap for a series of rough over-the-knee spankings. Ellie would set a rule that the spankings wouldn’t stop until the weather girl got wet. Ellie would really wail on her, and that tight ass would bear the mark of her

palm. It would be warped with welts, too. And the weather girl would start crying. And

Ellie would remind the weather girl that if she wanted the spankings to stop then she had to fuckin’ get wet. And when the weather girl finally *got* wet, Ellie would stop the spankings but start laughing at her. Laugh, and tell the skank that – despite all her

protestations to the contrary – she’d actually been turned on by it all. And then Ellie

would handcuff her and gag her and take duct tape to her ankles, because the weather girl would probably be the kind of filthy whore who was into that sort of thing. And the

weather girl would never ever leave her. And...

“Ma’am...?”

Ellie jerked her head up

“Have you had a chance to look at the menu?”

Ellie didn’t make eye contact with the waiter. Glanced, instead, at one of the tables

of old people. “I’ll have eggs,” she said.

“And how would you like them cooked?”

“Broken,” she said.

“Beg pardon, ma’am?”

She felt her cheeks flush. What had she just said? It really was like she was

hungover. Confused. Restless. Scatterbrained. “I’m sorry, I mean, scrambled. I’ll have

the meal deal with the biscuits, too.”

“Would you like grits with that?”

“Why not?”

“Alrighty then,” Ronnie said in a voice that was way too energetic, “one country

mornin’ breakfast, comin’ right up!” He waddled off to the kitchen.

At the nearest table, a lady so wrinkled she looked like a shar pei started loudly

denouncing the president. “You wanna know what Obama stands fer?” the lady said. She

was worked up. So excited, her shar pei wrinkles were flapping against one another.

“One Big Ass Mistake, America!”

The rest of the table let out raspy, old-people cackles. All of them, male and female,

sounded like witches.

“He’s a secret Muslim,” one of the older men (a chubby, bald fellow) said. “At least,

that’s what I think. Maybe he’s not, but I think that explains *everything*.”

“Why, yes, of course he’s a secret Muslim,” the shar pei woman said. “I can’t see

how people don’t see through that. I think he’s doing things to control the weather. Then he’s blaming it on coal, because he doesn’t like Kentucky. He knows Kentucky will

never vote for him, because we’re good Christian people and not Muslims.” There was

another idea the shar pei woman was trying to verbalize. She stammered to get it out.

There was some urgency in the matter. She shook her shar pei jowls again, as though

trying to *shake out* the word she was looking for. “S-s-so he’s trying to put coal out of business. And he’s messin’ up the weather...with some sorta weather machine...to do it. I guess what I mean to say is that he’s...well...you know... *framing* coal for this global warming thing.”

Ellie didn't have an opinion, one way or another, about the president. Like everyone

else in the church, Jesse had put up a yard sign for Romney. He'd gotten very excited

about it. He loathed Obama. But he never once referred to the president as a "secret

Muslim". And even he would have thought it sheer lunacy to accuse the president of

harnessing the power of the weather against his own people, simply to avenge an

electoral slight. But one day, forty or fifty years in the future – if he lived that long –

Jesse would probably be spouting nonsense every bit as...well...as *deranged* as that.

About some future president, Republican or Democrat. *Deranged*...that was the right word, wasn't it? Yes, deranged.

The brain was just a part of the body – like any other. It, too, could be eroded away

by the wash of decades. She thought about the forest of gnarled appendages at the nearby table. If something as hard as bone could be gradually warped by time and disease, then

what hope was there for the brain? It was, after all, only soft tissue.

And at that point Ellie felt a shudder. *I'll be exactly like those old people, too,*

someday, she thought.

As we grow very old, our **mind** breaks down.

She heard a loud whirring. A grimy plastic mannequin hand set a plate of scrambled

eggs and biscuits in front of her, and a bowl of grits to the side.

It was René again: the plastic/mechanical arm, the massive sinkhole in his skull, the

mouth without a bottom lip. The unintelligible mumbling. It was impossible, of course,

that he was waiting tables at two different places so far apart from each other. And yet, there he was.

He placed his cold plastic hand over Ellie's cold flesh hand and gently patted it.

Then, with some force, he moved her hand off of *He Wants Us Broken*. Picked it up.

Made pleasant, approving moans. Brought the tract up to his still-intact upper lip. Planted something akin to a kiss on it and returned it to the table. Then he crossed himself with his mechanical hand and said three words. "Haweh. Haweh. Haweh."

And this time, Ellie thought she understood what he meant. Could it be he was

saying "Holy, Holy, Holy"?

Before she could be sure, he returned the tract to her hands. He placed his whirring,

filthy plastic hand on her chin and tilted it up so that her eyes met his. There was power in his touch. Not sexual power, but rather *absolute* power. It was as though she'd been touched by the hand of royalty.

He muttered some more unintelligible words. Something, she intuited, *about her*.

Then he giggled and limped off to the kitchen.

Her eggs were damp and under-cooked. Her grits were – as advertised – gritty. Her

biscuits dry, possibly stale. She had half a mind to complain, but complaining about René suddenly seemed like a gross breach of etiquette. *If God wanted us broken*, she thought, *then René possessed God's favor. He's the most broken person I've ever seen*. Moreover, he validated her gospel tract. Validated not only that it was real – that she hadn't been hallucinating – but validated that it should be treated with reverence.

She nibbled slightly at her meal. Read and re-read and re-re-read the tract. How

could she waste time on something as simple as eating when she might be face-to-face

with a miracle? It was during her third re-reading of the tract that she felt a presence hovering over her again. She prayed to God: *please let it still be René, please let it still be René*.

A filthy, plastic whirring hand dropped two pieces of paper next to her plate. She

turned around. “Hey, René.”

He didn't answer.

She called out louder. Louder than shar pei lady. Louder than the blooping and

bleeping of the cash register. Louder than the small crowd stirring beyond the border of the restaurant proper – in the waiting area and gift shop.

“Hey, René!”

The waiter turned around. It was Ronnie again, not René. “Beg pardon, ma’am?” he

said.

“Oh,” Ellie said. “Nothing. I thought you were someone else.”

The waiter raised his eyebrows. Coughed. Went back into the kitchen.

Ellie briefly glanced at a check informing her that breakfast had cost a little over nine bucks. She pushed it aside and looked at the second piece of paper – a note (scrawled in a barely-legible hand).

YOU DID NOT OBEY & TURN BACK.

THEREFORE, GOD’S PLANS MUST INTERRUPT YOUR PLANS.

YOU SHALL BE DAMNED WITH BLESSINGS.

IT IS THE ONLY WAY.

THE WORLDLY AUTHORITIES ARE AWARE OF YOUR SCHEME
WITH LORI

AND ARE NOW,

AT THIS VERY MOMENT, ATTEMPTING TO TRACK YOU DOWN.

IF THEY FIND YOU, YOU SHALL BE LOCKED AWAY.

YOU ARE FAR TOO INTERESTING TO BE LOCKED AWAY.

YOU HAVE FAR TOO MANY SIGNS OF DEVOTION,

TOO GREAT A CAPACITY FOR BROKENNESS.

THEY WILL BE LOOKING FOR YOUR CAR.

LEAVE IT HERE IN THIS PARKING LOT.

I WILL BE OUT THERE, WAITING FOR YOU.

I WILL DRIVE YOU WHERE YOU NEED TO GO.

I WILL TAKE YOU TO LORI.

I AM THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN TAKE YOU TO LORI.

THE ARC OF THE UNIVERSE IS LONG,

BUT BENDS TOWARDS DEGENERACY.

Ellie held the note in her hand. Clutched it to her chest, fearful that it – like its

predecessor – would be transformed into a worthless napkin. But the gospel tract

remained with her. It had not been transformed into a napkin. So maybe this wouldn't

either, if she had enough faith. That must be the answer: the first note had faded from

reality because she'd not looked on it with sufficient faith. She'd assumed René was

insane. She'd been ungrateful for the message, so it was taken from her. She hadn't

deserved it.

She wouldn't make the same mistake this time. She flung a twenty on the table and

jogged out to the parking lot.

She did not see René outside, and this made her want to kick the rocking chairs

assembled near the restaurant's front. Even worse, there was a police car right next to the Scion. Its engine was running. The officer in the driver's seat seemed to be sticking his head out the window and glancing back at her. Had he come to take her back to

subdivision-sanity? Back to a world antiseptically devoid of passion and miracles?

Then she heard the familiar voice and the familiar words: "Haweh, haweh, haweh."

Holy, holy, holy. (Or, could it be "Hurry, hurry, hurry"?) She didn't question it. She

just followed the trail of the voice. Followed it, even though it led straight to the police car.

Her faith was rewarded. René sat there, smartly adorned in the uniform of a

Kentucky State Police trooper. He giggled and jerked his head to the side. She scurried to the passenger side and opened the door.

"I need to get my bags."

René shook his head then coughed up another word. "Obuh," he said (with a snort

appended to the last syllable).

Obey.

She was tempted to ignore this statement. (This request? This command?) She'd

ignored God's commandments before, after all. But she'd never before encountered a

being like René – not God, but closer to God than she was. That made a difference. Also, she'd never before heard such commandments spoken to her in a voice she could *literally hear*. That made a *huge* difference. It made disobeying sound more real, more like a mistake.

And besides, René knew about Lori. He'd even referred to her by name, in the note.

Said he could take Ellie to see her. Said Ellie was in danger of being caught and locked away. Ellie didn't want to be locked away.

She got in.

Revelations

In the time since filing the Amber Alert, Trooper Connelly had learned far more than

he'd wanted to know about Lori Morris. For years, she'd been a puzzle he couldn't quite

figure out. Not that he'd spent that much time *trying* to figure her out. His only job had been to cart her off to the hospital. He hadn't been *meant* to understand her. He hadn't *cared* about understanding her.

But when the detectives got a hold of her computer, they had answers. Who would've guessed she was a lesbo (or, at least, a part-time carpet muncher)? Who

would've guessed that she'd been planning this for so long? That she'd long-wanted to

kill herself and the baby? Scuttlebutt around the station was that she was a Satanist,

because the stuff on her computer indicated that she was doing all this so that she *would* get sent to Hell. Hell was what she wanted, more than anything. Separation from God.

She hated God for what *she thought* God had done to her. But God was good. She

was misunderstanding it all, blaming *God* for the acts of *Satan*. She'd fallen on her knees to Satan when she should've been on her knees before God.

Then again, maybe she didn't misunderstand things. Maybe she was consciously

trying to defame the Lord's name by falsely accusing Him of rape. Maybe she wasn't

crazy. Maybe she was evil. Maybe, instead of getting sent off to the hospital, she

should've gotten sent off to a good pastor for an exorcism.

But Connelly couldn't keep thinking about that. He had a job to do. The tech fellas

had sorted out the contact information for the woman from Indiana and Connelly was

supposed to call her husband. Yeah, that was a piece of shit assignment if there ever was one. How would he even broach the subject? ("Scuse me, mister, but did you know your

wife hated her life with you so much she was fixin' to go off and bump uglies with

another woman and then off herself? You didn't? Why, you had no clue? Are you sure?

Think real hard about things, because – and here’s something else you’re just gonna love

– there’s a baby’s life at stake. And not just any baby, a baby born with its little hunk of brain showin’ for everyone to see.”)

That’s not the way he handled it, of course. He wouldn’t have lasted long as a

trooper if he didn’t have manners. For starters, he introduced himself. “Hello, is this Mr.

Blake?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Trooper Connelly from the Virginia State Police, I’m afraid I need a

moment of your time.”

“You must have pushed in the wrong area code. This is Indiana, not Virginia.”

“I’m afraid this is about official business, sir. Do you know the whereabouts of your

wife?”

Silence. Then heavy breathing. “What’s wrong? Has there been an accident? Is she

okay?”

Damn, it would’ve been easier if the husband had been an asshole. He sounded like a

decent guy. It didn't make any sense, really, that he should turn out to be a good guy who was worried about the woman's safety. But he was. "Sir, I know you have some

questions and I'll share what I'm allowed to share with you after I ask *my* questions. Do you know where she is?"

"She should be in *West* Virginia, unless I heard her wrong. A business trip. What happened? Did she have a wreck? I knew she shouldn't have driven out that night."

This was the part where he had to break it to him. "Sir, we have reason to believe she

was, in fact, not on a business trip. We have reason to believe she may have been trying to harm herself."

"My...stars. How do you know that? Did she ram the car into a tree? Is she hurt? Is

she dead?"

"It's not any of those things. Not as far as we know. But, honestly, sir there's a lot

here we need to sort out. We have her cell phone number. We've been calling it, but

something seems to be wrong with the phone."

"It's going to voicemail? She'll let it do that, sometimes, if she's in a bad mood."

"No, not exactly like that. When I call the number, the line seems to go dead. There's

no ringing, no message. Nothing. I figured there might be something going on with my

phone, so I thought I'd ask you to try."

"I'll call her right now – or, at least, as soon as I get off the phone. But let me ask

you – what makes you think she wants to hurt herself?"

"We've uncovered social networking communications between her and another

woman, a Virginia resident. There's some indication that they wanted to do it together –

kill themselves, that is."

"Oh...oh, Lord, save her. Oh...Oh God. Oh."

The husband had sounded so strong up until that moment. He'd fought so hard to

maintain some sense of normality about it all. He'd scratched and clawed after normality the way a man about to fall off a cliff scratches and claws at land.

Now he sounded weak, the resolve leaking out of him each moment like air out of a

balloon. Connelly hated to be the guy who had to deflate him. But, on the other hand, the deflation was necessary. He'd asked too many questions before. Now that he'd gotten a

little taste of some answers, Connelly reckoned he wouldn't be so big on asking

questions. He'd be more likely to take directions.

"Get on your phone and try to contact her. Indiana State Police should be calling you

very soon to start their branch of the investigation.”

“Oh Lord...Oh, dear God please. She’s just my little baby. Confused, that’s all. She

doesn’t know better. Let her live and repent, Lord. Let her live, don’t let her die and go to Hell. Let her live and re-”.

Connelly wasn’t ordinarily the sort of man who would interrupt a prayer. But

ordinary went out the window in these sorts of situations. “Sir...sir...We’ll do our best to get her back in your arms. These days, with all the cell phones and email and social

networking data at our disposal, finding missing persons is much easier than it used to

be.”

* * *

Even Ellie didn’t know where she was.

This was only natural, as so many of her memories—the people, places and things that

could anchor and orient her – felt like fragments of a dream that was rapidly slipping

away. Her brain rebelled against this process. There was someone important...someone

she had to remember. The reason for all of this: the girl with whirlpool eyes; the girl who would suck her and probe her, who would take her to the farthest edge of her desires.

Then, together, they'd plunge over that edge to a Hell that was preferable to Earth. The name started with the letter L...Laura? No, not Laura.

Lori.

She remembered this much: she loved Lori, but Lori hadn't yet said that she loved

her back. They were going to fuck each other then die together. There was a...creature...named René involved with this, too. A mutilated man. He'd been the one

who'd taken her from her old life. In a police car? That didn't seem to make sense but,

yes, in a police car. They'd driven away from one world and had arrived in a new one – a place as dark and warm as a womb. A quiet place where the ground was slick with mud

and the air smelled like fading flowers.

She couldn't see her hand in front of her face, but she knew René was still with her.

She felt his cold, plastic hand guiding her along by the arm – as though he'd been to this place many times before and knew the way, or could at least see where he was going. She

also heard his voice.

“Duh-skusth,” he said.

Ellie struggled to understand him. *Disgust? Disguise?*

They stopped. René grabbed her chin and tilted it upward. “Duh skusth,” he

repeated, this time with a heightened tone of seriousness, a respect bordering on awe.

Oh, *the skies* – René was directing her attention to the stars overhead. They were several times larger than any stars she'd seen before, and each glowed with a different

vibrant color. Even more surprising, they were unstable. (No, more than unstable.

Liquid.) They throbbed and melted and trickled toward the horizon, leaving behind trails that looked like neon candle wax (or painted pus).

Ellie followed the course of a melting, pulsating green star until she began to feel

dizzy and nauseated. Her head started to pound in synch with the palpitations.

She shifted her focus to a blue star, hoping a more soothing color might settle her

nerves. It didn't help. It was too globby and too pale; the injured, blotchy blue of a bruise, not the rich blue of eyes and oceans. Each time the blue star throbbed, she imagined it

pumping diseased blood through the veins of all creation. She cringed, slipped, and lost her footing.

She heard a familiar whirring sound as René yanked at her hips to steady her.

Gooseflesh ran up the back of her neck, followed by a shudder, followed by a wave of

bitter embarrassment at how weak she must have just seemed to him. She'd gotten used

to a number of oddities over the last two days. So why did she find this bizarre sky so

uniquely disturbing?

She had only a hunch about the answer. It was one thing to feel increasingly comfortable around a deformed creature like René, or even to accept that degeneracy was

everyone's inevitable destination. But it was quite another to face the reality that stars, too, could devolve into something broken and freakish and wrong.

The arc of the universe was long but bent towards degeneracy.

It was too much for her exhausted senses. Yet, she needed to be brave and stare at

the sky. Anxiety and awkwardness no longer had a place in her life. A bizarre serenity

began to take hold of her. Yes, she was broken. What of it? In this place, the stars were too.

Like trickling raindrops on a windshield, the purple, red, green, orange, and blue

stars began to coalesce. Their colors mixed and darkened at the points of contact, while the trail each had left in its wake remained the original hue. Ellie decided an infected, deformed sky was a beautiful sky. She sighed.

René uttered a soft, approving moan and patted her on the back, as if to acknowledge

her progress in adjusting to her new surroundings. Then he led her onward. She followed

without questioning.

René did not seem the least bit troubled by the blackness at ground level.
Ellie

trusted this meant all was well. She kept her gaze fixed on the broken sky
and slipped

into a peaceful sleepwalker's trance.

When she came to, the trails of starry wax-pus had finished their courses for
the

night and trickled below the horizon. No new stars rose to replace them.
While the sky

had once seemed sick, it now seemed dead.

Ellie wondered how long she'd been sleepwalking. Obviously, some time
had passed

(how much, she couldn't say). She had little endurance for hiking.
Ordinarily, she wasn't able to stand more than a half hour of it before
turning back. But, despite apparently

journeying far longer than that, she felt rejuvenated.

René grabbed her chin once again. This time he tilted it downward, back
toward the

ground. Something cast a flickering yellow glow in the distance. The smell
of fading

flowers yielded to an eruption of pungent smoke that reached down Ellie's
throat,

grabbed at her stomach, and yanked. It reeked of overcooked pork, rotten
eggs, and rotten fruit. She dry heaved.

“Woreh!” René said, pointing toward the fire.

Ellie paused, trying to make sure she understood him. *Worry? Yes, my old life was*

marinated in worry. But I’m changing, and René seemed to have approved of the change.

So that couldn’t have been what he’d said. It must’ve been...

“Lori? She’s there, near that fire?”

René chuckled and patted Ellie on the shoulder. Was she to take that as a yes or as a

condescending no?

As they walked farther along, the glow grew in size and intensity, overcoming the

blackness. At first it seemed as though it might be a wasteland, a vast array of tall

bonfires. But as they marched through the strange night, ever closer, Ellie came to see it was a series of burning stone towers.

Fire flickered sporadically through their windows, at times revealing the silhouettes

of grotesque figures so deformed they made René seem like an Adonis. Fire thrived in a

constant, crackling roar at the very top of the structures – bathing each minaret and

battlement in flames. Along with the sounds of burning, she also heard desperate pleas

and sadistic laughs; animalistic grunts and orgasmic moans; the cracks of whips and the

clatter of chains—the sounds of suffering and its mischievous instigation.

The fire burned the creatures in the tower, but didn't seem to be killing them so

much as changing them into more degenerate shapes. Rendering them more holy.

Purifying them. As René guided her ever closer, Ellie wondered what exactly would become of her once she stepped inside. But this question was overwhelmed by a sudden

surge of undeniable arousal that pulsed through her veins. *I need to hurt her...I need to fuck her...I need to hurt her...I need to fuck her.*

They arrived at a tower entrance – a stone archway. Tall, lit torches stood unsteadily

at each end, wobbling back and forth in the wind, belching foul black clouds into the air and casting chaotic light on the first half dozen steps of a wide interior stone stairway.

Ellie found them almost-comically redundant. Torches posted right outside an

inferno? It made no sense.

“Tack hew up,” René said.

The torches crept toward Ellie. Amongst their flames, she glimpsed boiling blue eyes

peeking out of carbon-black faces. They weren't torches at all but rather living, burning men. As they approached her, the air started to boil and her brain started to boil and she let out a revolted wail.

René enjoyed a slobbery belly laugh as he insistently pushed her toward the creatures.

Most of the burning men's appendages were charred and weak, seeming as though

they might fall to the ground at any moment. Hence, their hunched-over gait that made

them look all the more strange.

Only their flabby bellies and hard cocks were left uncharred. The hairy, blistering

flesh of these two hungry parts—in flames but never completely consumed—reminded Ellie

of the burning bush that spoke to Moses.

The burning men each grabbed Ellie by an arm. Their flames galloped onto her like

small, rabid animals. Burned her clothes and burned her skin and melted the two together until there was no distinction between them. Then she, too, was a walking torch. She, too, smelled of overcooked pork, rotten eggs, and rotten fruit. They had spread their fire on to her, like a disease. Their cremation was a contagion.

By all rights, it should have been agonizing. But instead there was only a dull

stinging sensation, a crackling in her nerves as if they were finally waking up. As if

they'd been asleep her whole life – artificially sedated by her parents, her school, her church, and her husband.

By all rights, it should have been horrifying. At the very least, the smell of her own

burning flesh should have left her disgusted. But she felt increasingly convinced that it wasn't really her body burning, but rather some obsolete mask that desperately *needed* and *deserved* destruction.

The men-she'd-thought-were-torches led her into the tower and up a flight of stairs.

She looked back to see if René was coming with them. She could only make him out in

silhouette. He stood on the other side of the threshold, repeatedly bowing at the waist.

Making the sign of the cross. Uttering praise: "Haweh. Haweh. Haweh."

During the trio's ascent, they came upon a dozen pudgy, naked, blistered, half-

human things. Some trotted up the stairs on all fours. Some giggled. Some screamed

vulgar threats. Some ignored the procession entirely and used the stairway as an arena for orgies. "Who else wants a piece of this?" a pig-man said after shooting his load into the bleeding ass of a scorched, cackling, masturbating crone. Two of his kin trotted forward and squealed with delight.

On closer examination, Ellie saw the crone wasn't masturbating. Rather, her index

finger had been forcibly attached to her vulva by a nail that had been driven through an arthritic knuckle. And, upon further reflection, that cackling *might* have been weeping.

Should Ellie have been shocked that such an obscenity was being committed in plain

sight? A vague sense that she *should* be shocked rose to her consciousness, but quickly passed. The fire was purifying her. Melting away her mask, exposing the brokenness

underneath. Old ways of thinking drifted away from her, like the smoke drifting from her head.

Ellie and her guides found ample room on the wide stairs to slip past the spectacle,

but they couldn't avoid the puddle of blood and shit that had seeped from the old woman.

She tread carefully, so she wouldn't slip. But she felt not even a twinge of guilt or

revulsion when the filth clung to her feet, and she could tell that such emotions never

even occurred to her guides.

She was on her way to becoming more like them.

She felt strange sensations deep inside her head. Maybe they were growing pains, as

new physical structures developed in her brain that would enable her to better understand how this realm worked. Or maybe, old parts of her brain – the parts devoted to the

preservation of conventional morality – were simply dying. In any event, she sensed she

was mutating into something better-than-human. *Wiser-than-human*. She became more and more convinced the events she'd just witnessed were

beautiful.

How could she think otherwise? The creatures and their mate (victim?) were

arguably even more broken than she was, and God wanted everyone to be as broken as

possible. She couldn't remember how she'd first learned that God wanted everyone to be

as broken as possible, but the important thing was she *knew* it. She knew it in the boiling marrow of her bones. Therefore, logically, every single one of these creatures should be envied, not scorned.

What was this place? She still didn't know, exactly, but felt certain that it was a *holy* place. Yes, of that she was sure. Only one thing could make it better.

"Where's Lori?" she asked.

Her guides responded by pointing fiery fingers upward.

The trio climbed five additional flights of stairs, with similar sacred perversions

sporadically unfolding around them. On the second flight, a pig man moaned ecstatically

while a charred figure used a hot spike to pry out his eyes. On the landing between the

third and fourth flights, a pig-man with tits (or, a pig-woman with a cock?) hung by the neck from a rusty steel chain tethered to a rickety, improvised gallows. Still alive, the creature screamed curses and violently jacked off. Below the gallows, a man-sized worm

wearing an executioner's hood wriggled on the ground as globs of thick cum rained down

on it.

The last flight of stairs led to a battlement. Here, in the open air, the fire raged as it hadn't on the stairs. All manner of monsters danced seizure-like jigs on the burning stone floor. "This is truly living!" one of the pig-men said, right before collapsing. When he fell, his back and neck and head caved in, spewing forth cinders and ash. Other creatures leapt from the tower (not so much to escape, Ellie reasoned, as to start the process all over again, to repeat the buffet of gleeful horrors the previous floors offered). Like

children at a swimming pool, they weren't yet ready to leave.

Ellie's guides pushed her toward the middle of the battlement, then slunk back

toward the stairs.

"Wait," she called. "Where's Lori?"

They pointed upward, at the smoke gusting into the black sky. Was this a trick? Had

Lori been burnt to death? When her guides had pointed skyward, were they implying

she'd been reduced to cinders and ash, and that Ellie would soon meet the same fate?

It was as if the tower was a giant stake at which she was being burned, but she made

no attempt to flee. "Where's Lori?" she grunted through blistered lips. "Where's Lori?"

she asked as her skin flaked away into bits of carbon and her knuckles
glowed like hot

coals.

A gale swept over the battlement, and she felt wicked stings in her
shoulders. She

was kicked roughly up into the air. *I'm no longer a body now*, she thought .
I'm ashes. I'm fumes.

But she was mistaken. Her hands were badly burnt, yes, but still whole. She
wasn't

disintegrating, she was being carried off by a legless, emaciated old man
with black,

feathered wings. His talons pierced her skin as they held her secure.
Together they flew through the black smoke and toward a glaring, cruel
light.

Damned with Blessings

The legless angel deposited her on a massive plateau of smoldering ash.
Seven suns

ringed a blue sky like jewels in a crown. Seven gleaming white towers of
various heights rose from the plateau. She felt a steady tremor beneath her.
She heard a steady, feral hum above her.

There was...chanting. Wailing. A multitude of voices – or things *like* voices
—

coming from the towers. She looked up and saw thousands of naked,
deformed angels

writhing on battlements. They shouted these words with mutilated lips:
“Haweh, haweh,

haweh.”

Some of them had four wings and some of them had two wings and some of them

had one wing and some of them only had a half a wing and some of them only had

stubby, barely-noticeable appendages where wings used to be. Some of them had white

wings, some had black wings, some had gray wings, some had purple wings, some had

green wings.

Some seemed to be dead and rotting, but still chanting. Some were pristine, intact,

strong and healthy. As Ellie craned her head farther up, she saw that some of the

creatures were touching each other. Hunching down, presenting themselves. Offering

orifices up to other creatures’ appendages.

Oh yes, that was what was happening: the angels were violently fucking each other.

Wingless angels shoved their stubby, bare former-wing appendages into waiting mouths,

shoved their talons into waiting vaginas. The winged angels were, often but not always,

the passive partners; the ones who were howling, over and over: “Haweh, haweh,

haweh.”

Ellie felt her burnt lips sweetly ache as she sang along. “Holy, holy, holy.”

She focused on a pair of angels standing on a battlement relatively low to the ground.

The female had skin the color of alabaster, but sparkled with the rainbow reflection of

diamond piercings all over her face, nipples, wings, and legs. The male was black with

rot, but this did not prevent him pleasure. He finger-fucked the female from behind, and her breasts jiggled rhythmically in response. Her nipples boasted wide pinkish-brown

areolas that were fun to watch as they jiggled.

Then the male whipped her around and raked her face with his talons. Bits of

diamond-pierced flesh fell from her cheek, kicking up wisps of ash as they landed on the plateau. One of the rotting male’s talons fell off, too.

A meager bit of meat hung between the male angel’s legs, but it grew longer as he

tugged at the diamond piercings in the female’s nipple. Even from her low vantage point, Ellie could see the nipple stretch away from the breast. The female closed her eyes and

bit her lip and whimpered and squirmed. She was gorgeous and helpless and would

never, ever leave her loving torturer.

It was a beautiful moment, and Ellie wept joyfully as she watched. She slipped burnt

fingers through a crusty, scarred layer of burnt clothes-skin and onto her vulva. As she began to stimulate her clit, a giant hand made of flame picked her off the ground and

brought her up to meet a giant face-of-flame. And the Man of Flame opened His mouth,

letting out something like words.

You have questions.

“Where’s Lori?”

You will meet her. You will help me discipline her.

“What is this place? Heaven? Hell?”

Both. “Heaven” and “Hell” are just two names for the same place. They are one

and the same.

“Who are you? God? The Devil?”

I have been called both names. But names are not my concern. Discipline is my

concern. Mating is my concern. Degeneracy is my concern. Worship is my concern.

She didn’t understand everything, but she understood enough. His answers made

more sense than anything she’d learned in Bible study. She felt both holy and wicked

there in His palm, but no longer saw these states as contradictory. Waves of sadistic awe and serene darkness crested in her heart. “I worship You,” Ellie said.

I know. You have worshiped me since you were very young. You worshiped me even

before you knew about me. That is why you shall have a place of honor here, as one of my angels. One of my demons. I have had you brought here –body and soul intact, not

dead – to become one of my Ambassadors to Earth.

And the Omnipotent tossed two wisps of flame from His hand, and they landed on

Eleanor’s shoulders like hot wax. And they grew into wings the color of bruises. And she fell to her knees and begged the Omnipotent to take her to Lori. And the Omnipotent

granted this prayer, and Lori was revealed to Eleanor.

Had Eleanor not been elevated to the rank of angel, she may not have recognized

Lori. She had lost weight. Her bones had been broken and healed and re-broken several

times. Patches of flesh were missing from her face, her stomach, and her back. But

Eleanor recognized the eyes and the breasts – the same eyes and breasts that had

appeared in her photos.

Torture her, the Omnipotent commanded.

And the angel Eleanor strode over toward her immobile love and kicked her in the

head. “Tell me you love me,” she commanded.

* * *

Lori’s mind could no longer afford the luxury of memory; in fact the very concept of

memory grew more and more alien to her with each passing hour spent with the

Omnipotent in his Palace of Abominations.

Not only had her body been reshaped, her mind and her will had as well. The

Omnipotent had twisted her brain and wrung all rebellion out of it. She existed only to

suffer and procreate without resistance. Her mind could focus only on the various modes

of pain: burning, cutting, breaking, ramming, blistering. Flogging, fucking, birth.

She did not recognize the voice or its owner. The angel was, judging by the two

swollen mounds on its chest, female. But no other visual cue stood out as unique. She did not, for example, recognize the face. It was burnt, blistered, and snarling – like all the rest of them.

However, what the angel *demand*ed was odd. *More* than odd. Downright alarming.

Did the angel not know that she was the exclusive property of the Omnipotent – to

be touched only by Him? Did the angel not see that, even if she *wanted* to utter the unfamiliar sounds demanded of her, she physically couldn't? Her lips had been fused

together. The upper lip and lower lip were now one burnt, blistered flap of skin.

* * *

Eleanor felt a dull, unfamiliar ache in her fingers. Glancing down, she noticed with

bemusement that they had just changed into talons – knobby, gnarled, and sharp.

Beautifully ugly. She pierced one through Lori's mouth and proceeded to rip a gash from

left to right.

Eleanor tried to focus enough so that her cut would cleanly separate the two lips

from each other, but she was a novice at using her new anatomy and intensely aroused as

well. The gash ended up running all the way up to Lori's right cheekbone and down to

the left side of her chin. Blood, at first, oozed out. Then it pulsed out, rhythmically.

Spurt...spurt...spurt. The sight of suffering and its mischievous instigation!

She had freed part of Lori's mouth, though. Lori had no more excuses for failing to

confess her love. "Tell me you love me," Eleanor commanded again.

Lori uttered a sound somewhere in between a whimper and a shriek. Blood flooded

her mouth and she began to cough, wheeze, and spit.

Eleanor grabbed on to Lori's nipples. Despite all Lori had been through, they felt

soft and warm. Eleanor caressed them. She straddled Lori. Bent down and licked a

nipple. It hardened. Even as blood began to drip down Lori's chin and onto her chest, it hardened.

Eleanor ran her tongue up the breast, into the thickening puddle of blood. Tasted it.

Liked it. Trailed her tongue up Lori's neck. Nibbled her ear, gently. Whispered to her.

"Tell me you love me."

* * *

Lori felt like she had sunk deep under a lake, and the angel was on land barking at

her. She felt no closeness to her.

Likewise, she felt no affection for her. (Why should she? A marionette exhibits no

love for its puppeteer.) Her body responded to the angel's touches strictly out of instinct.

Her nerves were wired in such a way that her nipple hardened when it was licked. That

was that. There was nothing more to it.

Still, the Omnipotent might punish her. Or punish the angel. Or punish both of them.

The angel should know better than to touch her. Only the Omnipotent could do that. She

thrashed her head around, spit out more blood, and let out a guttural livestock sound.

“Nuh-uhh-ghuh-nuh.”

* * *

Was that a “no”? Did Lori still have the will to defy her?

Eleanor had tasted Lori's blood, and now she decided she wanted to taste her cunt.

She spread Lori's broken legs (eliciting many howls from the bitch) and tasted the

warmth, the wetness there. *The tastes of suffering and its mischievous instigation!*

Tasting wasn't enough. She had to start chewing. She had to start ripping the meat

away until a piece of outer labia dangled from her mouth. Lori screamed and started to

pass out.

Eleanor slapped her. “Don’t you dare go to sleep on me.” She inserted a talon

between Lori’s legs. It did what talons do. Blood pooled together with her natural

wetness, making the going deliciously slippery. The talon slammed deep and Lori bucked

in rhythm with the penetration. “Tell me you love me,” Eleanor commanded. “Now, you

fuckin’ whore.”

Eleanor felt more alive than she ever had. More aroused than she ever had. She

turned herself around so that she was sitting on Lori’s face while at the same time finger fucking her. She began to grind her vulva into Lori’s mouth-wound. A piece of meat

from Lori’s mouth came up to meet her.

Lori licked her. Tentatively at first, but then more enthusiastically. Even began to

target her efforts on Eleanor’s clit. And Eleanor had increased the rate at which she thrust her talon into Lori’s pussy. And they both let out loud moans and Eleanor felt herself

surging toward climax, but climax wasn’t the most important thing. She pulled herself off Lori and commanded her once again. “Now, tell me that you love me.”

And Lori opened her mouth, but choked on her own blood and couldn’t articulate

words. All that she managed to produce was a groan. A grunting, howling sound.

“Just nod,” Eleanor said through gritted teeth. “Just nod if you love me.”

And, after a long time, Lori’s head shuddered with a tiny twitch. Then she coughed

up more blood, forcing her head into a convulsion not unlike a nod. And Eleanor knew

(finally, *knew*) that a beautiful young woman loved her. It was as though there were a million little windows in her brain. Seeing Lori confess her love made her feel like all of them had been opened to let in fresh air.

Her victory was short-lived, though, as the hand of the Omnipotent suddenly

appeared and picked Lori up from the ground.

How dare my concubine commit adultery in my presence? How dare she declare her

love for another?

And, with that, His hand of flame fell over the gash Eleanor had made in Lori’s face.

And the two edges of the gash were once again fused together. And He cauterized her

cunt-wounds. And then He shrunk Himself down to the size of a mortal man, and took on

a naked mortal man’s appearance. And He held a flogger made of living lampreys and

took it to His concubine as punishment for confessing love for another.

* * *

And this was the game Eleanor and I played with Lori. Eleanor tortured Lori until

she was convinced that Lori had confessed her love for her. Then I tortured Lori for having confessed love for another, for having lain with another. I would not ordinarily have permitted an angel to play with my concubine. No one plays with my things without my permission.

The play session was only permitted because it was part of Lori's torture. It was a

sort of warm up. Foreplay. And Eleanor was the most exquisite torturer. I wept when I saw her at work.

Miracles

“MIRACLE BABY” SURVIVES APPARENT ABDUCTION

By Nancy Cavendish

Associated Press

PORTSMOUTH, Virginia (AP) – The grandmother of an abducted infant called his

return “a miracle”, but authorities say this development only raises more questions about the continued disappearance of the baby's mother.

A spokesman for the Virginia State Police stated that twenty-four year old Lori Morris

went missing the same day as her child and was, in fact, identified by an eyewitness

account as his abductor. Police also stated they had reason to believe that an Indiana

woman (thirty-seven year old Eleanor Blake) may have also been involved in the

abduction plot. The return of the special needs infant, apparently unharmed despite

previous reports he had been injured by his mother, has lead police to speculate that Ms.

Morris may have had second thoughts about the abduction and returned him home.

“We suspect that Lori Morris and Eleanor Blake came to regret their decision,” Trooper

John Connelly of the Virginia State Police said. “We have reason to believe, however,

that they may still be dangerous to themselves or others. We ask that they continue to

make things right and turn themselves in. Further attempts to evade justice will only

make their situation worse. We have no other comment at this time.”

The infant’s grandmother and legal guardian, forty-seven year old Jennifer Morris,

disputes the State Police theory that her daughter returned the infant. “It wasn’t Lori who brought Josh back to us. It was an angel.” Jennifer Morris’ story of being awakened at

three in the morning by a visitor who returned the child has gone viral on social media.

One status she posted yesterday morning described the alleged encounter this way: “I

couldn't see him that well. It was dark. I couldn't understand everything he was saying. It was like he was speaking in tongues. But I saw him, and then – like that – he was gone.

Back to Heaven.”

Jennifer Morris reports that Victory Assembly of God (where she is a member) has

scheduled a special prayer and praise service to honor the child's return. “I have faith that this will be the first of many miracles. Josh will get better, over time. His physical

problems will go away, I just know it. He's my miracle baby. There's no reason he won't

grow up to get married and have a family, like everyone else. There's no reason why he

won't grow to a ripe, old age. It's clear God saved Josh for a reason. He has a special

purpose for this child to fulfill.”

ABOUT NICOLE CUSHING

Nicole Cushing is an author of dark fiction.

Her debut novel *Mr. Suicide* was released by Word Horde in July, 2015. Her first

full-length short story collection, *The Mirrors*, was officially released by Cycatrix Press in October, 2015. She is the author of the novellas *Children of No One* (nominated for the 2013 Shirley Jackson Award) and *I Am the New God*.

The anthology *Werewolves & Shapeshifters: Encounters With The Beast Within*

includes Nicole's short fiction (alongside stories by Neil Gaiman, George R.R. Martin,

Charlaine Harris, and Chuck Palahniuk). One of her tales received an honorable mention

for Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year, Volume 6*. Three of her tales received honorable mentions for Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year, Volume 5*. One of her stories was selected for the Tangent Online 2013 Recommended Reading List. Several of

her stories have been (or are currently being) adapted for audio presentation on podcasts such as *Tales to Terrify*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast Macabre*. All told, Nicole has sold well over twenty short stories to various markets in the U.S. and U.K.

Her essay on the racism of H.P. Lovecraft has been quoted by *The Guardian* and

linked to by *The Atlantic Monthly*.

She invites correspondence via Facebook, Twitter, or (if one must be old-fashioned

about it) email at nicolecushingwriter@gmail.com.

A native of Maryland, she now lives with her husband in Indiana.

The Sadist's Bible is her first novella with 01Publishing.

FUN FACTS ABOUT NICOLE

- Nicole cites Thomas Ligotti, Hubert Selby, Jr. and Phillip K. Dick as some of her

influences.

- She frequently writes while listening to the music of Phillip Glass, Shostakovich, or

Alfred Schnittke.

- All of this creates cognitive dissonance, as Nicole is actually quite the redneck woman at heart.
- Nicole can be found stumbling around the lands of Facebook and Twitter, tapping the

microphone and repeatedly asking “Is this thing on?”

PRAISE FOR NICOLE CUSHING...

“The confidence and expertise so blatantly evident in Nicole Cushing’s writing is astonishing.” —**Thomas Ligotti**

“Nicole Cushing comes in smart and hard, skilled and strange times three. Many aspire. But you can’t fake this kind of weird.”

—**John Skipp, *NY Times Bestselling Author***

“This tale of a damaged and murderous child is the most original horror novel I’ve read in years. Cushing’s prose is rapid-fire, grisly, and passionate.” —**Poppy Z. Brite, reference to *Mr.***

Suicide

“Audacious, original and gleefully offensive, a broadside against the entire notion of divinity, with an ending you’ll never see coming. Nicole Cushing is somebody to watch.” —**Jack**

Ketchum, in reference to *I Am the New God*

“Nicole Cushing’s stories grab you by the throat — and don’t let go until they have slapped you around a bit. I know of few writers of contemporary weird fiction whose stories pack the raw emotional power that hers do...” —**S.T. Joshi , in reference to**

The Mirrors

ABOUT 01PUBLISHING

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